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An Educational Approach to Planning the Future Spatial Development of a Small Town: The Case of Čakovec, Croatia

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1 ABSTRACT

European policy documents underline the vital contribution of small and medium-sized towns to the urban systems of EU member states. Across several countries, there is a growing intention to equip these towns with new policy instruments that would strategically strengthen their position as drivers of regional development. Common areas of intervention include the regeneration of public buildings, support for business growth and innovation, enhanced regional connectivity, housing improvements, and increased investment in culture, education, and social services.

In the education of urban planners within the course Urban Planning Workshop 1: Settlement Planning at the Graduate Study Program in Architecture and Urban Planning at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb, small and medium-sized towns hold particular importance. Due to their optimal scale and the complexity of their challenges, they serve as suitable case studies through which students learn the processes of strategic thinking and spatial planning for future urban development. For the purposes of this paper, the example of the small town of Čakovec in northern Croatia was selected. In the academic year 2025/2026, Čakovec served as the workshop assignment for which students were tasked with proposing potential spatial development visions for the town for the period up to 2050.

The aim of this article is to present the educational process in Urban Planning Workshop 1: Settlement Planning, which focuses on planning the long-term future development of a small town. The main objective of the workshop is to formulate a comprehensive vision for the town's spatial development, while also providing a more detailed elaboration of selected areas considered relevant for future transformation and growth.

Keywords: Spatial planning, Small town, Development vision, Education, Čakovec

2 INTRODUCTION

Education in the field of spatial planning is largely shaped by national contexts and the institutional frameworks of individual countries. Janin Rivolin et al. (2025) start from the assumption that the educational process involves the transmission and development of specialized technical knowledge that can be taught through theoretical and practical education, independently of the specific features of national planning systems. They further argue that, although institutional and legal frameworks significantly influence professional practice, they do not fully determine the content and structure of technical knowledge within educational programmes. The authors advocate a clear distinction between spatial planning and urban governance, with the former serving as an instrument for the achievement of the latter. Technical knowledge in spatial planning is most effectively acquired when spatial zoning is established as its foundation and when long-term spatial patterns are identified.

Teaching requires that knowledge be presented to future professionals in a systematic and consistent manner. Due to the specific nature of education in the fields of urbanism and spatial planning, this requirement is less pronounced, as these fields encompass a complex domain of knowledge and practice in which diversity poses increasing challenges (Millard-Ball et al., 2021; Diko et al., 2023).

Understanding complex spatial systems and processes requires specific practical skills as well as theoretical knowledge drawn from multiple scientific disciplines and fields, thereby making the education of spatial planners more comprehensive. AESOP (2024) highlights the need to place particular emphasis on the

development of strategic thinking competencies and on strengthening capacities for long-term foresight and spatial planning, whether at the regional or local level.

Since the 1990s, particular attention has been given in Europe to strategic spatial planning as a means of addressing economic, social, and environmental challenges, with the aim of developing a coordinated vision to guide medium- and long-term development (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013; Balducci, Fedeli, & Pasqui, 2011; Albrechts, Healey, & Kunzmann, 2003). Hersperger et al. (2019) point out that strategic spatial plans focus on a combination of development strategies and strategic urban projects. Schmitt and van Well (2016) argue that attention is predominantly directed toward governance processes, while insufficient emphasis is placed on linking these processes to physical transformations in terms of land cover and land-use change. In the implementation of strategic plans, particular attention should be paid to local statutory plans (Mäntysalo, Kangasoja, & Kanninen, 2015; van den Broeck, 2013), as these enable the physical transformation of space.

Small towns represent a particularly suitable context for the education of future spatial planners within the field of spatial planning. European policy documents emphasize their key contribution to the urban systems of EU Member States, and in many countries there is a stated intention to equip them with new policy instruments aimed at strategically strengthening their role as drivers of regional development. ESPON (2024) point out that particular attention should be devoted to development through the renewal of public buildings, support for entrepreneurship and innovation, the enhancement of regional connectivity, improvements in housing, and investments in culture, education, and social services. Within urban systems, such towns constitute spatial systems in which relationships between governance processes and physical spatial transformation are more readily observable and, due to their scale, less complex, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of space compared to large metropolitan areas.

The aim of this paper is to present the educational process in Urban Planning Workshop 1: Settlement Planning, which focuses on planning the long-term future development of a small town. The main objective of the workshop is to formulate a comprehensive vision for the town's spatial development, while also providing a more detailed elaboration of selected areas considered relevant for future transformation and growth.

3 EDUCATION OF FUTURE SPATIAL PLANNERS ON THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL TOWNS

3.1 Education of Spatial Planners in the Context of EU Documents

The most significant European documents related to the education of spatial planners are the result of the work of two organizations: the European Council of Spatial Planners (ECTP-CEU) and the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP).

During the ECTP-CEU meeting in Athens in 1995, national institutes and professional associations of planners within the European Economic Community signed the International Agreement and Declaration, thereby harmonizing professional standards, ethical principles, and shared objectives for the education and practice of spatial planning in Europe. In the supplement of Appendix B: Education and Training of the Charter, five common cores were highlighted as essential for the education of spatial planners, representing a fundamental part of the planning profession in Europe:

- Environmental Context – Perception and evaluation of the environment; local development; sustainable development; individual needs.
- Theory and Methodology of Planning – History and theory of planning; urban policies; spatial and temporal parameters; methods and research.
- Institutional Framework – Legislation and administration; local economy; interactions at national, regional, and local levels; statistics and resources.
- Professional Practice and Technique – Planning and design; strategies and simulations; interdisciplinary teams; governance and implementation; communication; design and aesthetics.
- Professional Matters – Professional knowledge and competence; responsibility and ethics; guidelines for practice; codes of conduct; promotion of standards.

In its 2013 document, Charter of European Planning, ECTP-CEU points out that research and analysis, advocacy and mediation, and the ability to envision, evaluate, and promote potential future options for urban, spatial, and territorial development constitute the core commitments of planners. In the Guidelines on Professional Competences in Spatial Planning (2017), ECTP-CEU presented a framework defining the skills, knowledge, and responsibilities that spatial planners should possess in order to practice their profession competently and effectively. The document emphasizes three specific needs for the competences of spatial planners: critical thinking and understanding of the rationale of planning, including its theoretical and legal foundations; an understanding of spatial systems; and the technical and creative competences required to engage in planning practice. These are linked to eight core competences, which are presented in Table 1.

Specific needs for the competences	Core competences
Critical thinking and understanding of the rationale of planning and its theoretical and legal basis	The Rationale of Planning: Spatial planning plays a key role within a market-oriented environment, as it is grounded in the principles of sustainability, social justice, and ethical practice. It balances individual rights with public interest, enabling evidence-based decision-making and the resolution of spatial conflicts. Planners must be aware of the political and ethical dimensions of planning, particularly in relation to the public good, equity, and the fair representation of all stakeholders.
An understanding of the spatial systems	Socio-economic systems: Spatial planning requires an integrated understanding of social and economic systems and their spatial implications. Planners must possess fundamental knowledge of geographic analysis and operational contexts in order to assess political, social, and economic factors, with specialized expertise necessarily linked to local conditions.
	The Built Environment: Spatial planning requires an understanding of the built environment and its impact on quality of life and sustainable development. Particular attention is given to the principles and processes of creating high-quality spaces, the role of urban design, and the evaluation of design. Planners must consider the strategic potential of planning, climate change, challenges in historic contexts, and develop skills for place-making, alongside the ability to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration and mediation to foster inclusive and safe urban environments.
	Spatial planning requires an understanding of physical and biological systems and the effective management of resources, including health, quality of life, and the sustainable use of ecosystems, landscapes, and energy resources. Particular emphasis is placed on the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity, climate change adaptation, heritage protection, the development of renewable energy sources, and the application of planning in maritime areas.
Technical and creative competence needed to engage in planning practice	Planning Techniques: Spatial planning requires both quantitative and qualitative techniques to address spatial challenges and support policy implementation. Planners employ methods to define problems and collaborate within multidisciplinary teams. Planning involves the analysis, assessment, and monitoring of development alternatives and requires specialized knowledge and skills. This includes scenario development and evaluation, visualization of alternatives, land-use and social needs analysis, resource management, assessment of transport impacts, fieldwork, and the application of GIS and other analytical tools. Particular emphasis is placed on interdisciplinary collaboration, urban design, and the capacity for mediation, negotiation, and stakeholder participation.
	Independent Research: A key outcome of education in spatial planning is the development of competencies for independent research, including literature analysis, data collection, application of research methods, and the use of IT tools for analysis and evaluation. Research skills can also be assessed through alternative formats, without the necessity of producing a formal thesis or dissertation.
	Planning Instruments: Spatial planning requires knowledge of institutional and legal frameworks and the application of legal, administrative, and financial instruments. This includes understanding national, European, and international contexts, relevant directives and environmental protection instruments, legislation, and participation systems in planning processes.
	The Planning Product: The outputs of spatial planning include policies, instruments, programs, projects, strategies, and urban and landscape plans at different territorial levels. They encompass strategic frameworks and development visions, thematic strategies for water, energy, and food security, urban regeneration programs, and the integrated use of land, transport, and infrastructure. Planners must combine technical, creative, and personal knowledge and skills, including project management, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and knowledge transfer, alongside competencies in negotiation, mediation, advocacy, and leadership.

Table 1: ECTP-CEU specific need and core competences defined in Guidelines on Professional Competences in Spatial Planning (2017). Source: Author according to ECTP-CEU, 2017.

The AESOP Core Curriculum (2024) represents an updated version of the Core Requirements for a high-quality European Planning Education (1995) issued as part of AESOP's statement odn European Planning Education. The document has two crucial roles for AESOP: identifying knowledge, competencies and values deemed vital for spatial planners at the beginning of the 21st century; and serving as a 'benchmark' for the evaluation of applications and admission of new member schools and their education programmes.

AESOP core curriculum (2024) of planning programs highlights three essential components – knowledge, practical skills, and values – that planners are expected to acquire or apply in order to carry out their responsibilities in a socially responsible and professionally ethical way. Graduates are expected to understand spatial dynamics across different scales, demonstrating the ability to produce, manage, analyse, interpret, and communicate knowledge relevant to spatial planning. They should also be able to translate this knowledge into practice by designing, evaluating, and implementing spatial interventions that consider

multiple stakeholders. Finally, graduates are encouraged to develop a sustainable professional practice by assuming the societal responsibilities inherent to the role of a spatial planner.

In Chapter B, From Knowledge to Action, the development of knowledge is emphasized: regarding the nature, purpose, theory, and methods of planning; its historical evolution as an institution and profession; planning instruments and their adaptation to new challenges; the role of actors and citizens in democratic processes; the political, legal, and cultural context of planning; the application of transformational technologies; and transformative action in the context of sustainable development, climate crises, and spatial injustice.

In addition, the chapter highlights the need to develop practical competencies related to: the assessment and enhancement of the values of natural and built environments; the application of planning concepts, instruments, and measures in practice; the integration of different types of knowledge as well as aesthetic and design dimensions into planning proposals; the development of design and visual representation skills; the preparation of plans, programs, and measures, and participation in their implementation; active collaboration with civil society and stakeholders; and the management of complex governance and transformation processes.

Finally, it stresses the importance of cultivating an appropriate attitude and sense of responsibility, encompassing a conscientious and value-driven approach to planning that acknowledges its ethical implications, the cultural embeddedness of social and collective processes, democratic procedures, and rights such as the "right to the city," with particular attention to social justice, human and environmental rights, and respect for planetary boundaries.

3.2 Urban Planning Workshop 1: Settlement Planning: Case study Čakovec, Croatia

Urban Planning Workshop 1: Settlement Planning (UPW1) is one of the courses in the field of urbanism and spatial planning, offered in the first semester of the Graduate Studies in Architecture and Urbanism at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb. The main objective of the course is to develop a vision and concept for the spatial development of a small town based on the principles of sustainability. In the academic year 2025/2026, the assignment focused on the case study of the City of Čakovec.

The spatial development vision in UPW1 addresses the administrative area of the local government unit, the City of Čakovec, in the context of its surrounding settlements, with particular attention to the central settlement as well as Mihovljan, Savska Ves, and Ivanovec as potential areas for urban expansion. The task requires students to engage in strategic spatial thinking, assessing the potentials of the area and its acceptable capacities while taking into account spatial specificities and limitations arising from its unique values. Development guided by the principles of sustainability, as a paradigm of contemporary spatial planning, must be integrated into spatial visions and concepts to result in an environment suitable for living, working, and leisure, equipped with all necessary supporting facilities to meet societal standards.

Following analyses of the existing conditions, spatial planning documentation, and strategic development plans, the course assignment is developed on two levels of detail. At the first level, based on the objectives defined in the Spatial Plan of the City of Čakovec and the General Urban Plan of Čakovec, the town's development goals are established, and a vision for the spatial development of Čakovec is proposed and elaborated. At the second level, in accordance with the selected development concept, an optimal development program is proposed for individual areas of Čakovec, including concepts for land use, transportation, and spatial structures, as well as photomontages illustrating possible programmatic, design, and functional arrangements of the selected areas.

The course Urban Planning Workshop 1: Settlement Planning is thematically closely linked to Research Seminar 1: Settlement Planning and is primarily designed to complement and expand the knowledge and insights required to complete the assigned task. The aim of the course is to investigate spatial planning and urban design topics that contribute to the formulation of a spatial vision for the development of the studied small town and to propose a spatial development concept for the selected area. The course has a research-oriented character and culminates in the preparation of a seminar paper on the assigned topic.

At the beginning of the semester, in collaboration with the City of Čakovec and the Association of Architects of Međimurje, a joint site visit and invited lectures were organized for students to provide them with insights into the spatial specificities and local needs, as informed by professionals and residents.

In the summer semester, students will continue working on the Čakovec area within the framework of Urban Planning Workshop 2: Urban Transformation, where, in accordance with their previously developed concept and development plan, they will create an urban-architectural design for the selected area. The most successful student projects from both courses will be exhibited in Čakovec at the end of the academic year, and a publication will be issued in collaboration with the local government.

3.2.1 City of Čakovec

The City of Čakovec is located in the northern part of the Republic of Croatia, in the central area of Međimurje County, serving as the administrative, governance, and transport center of the region. It covers an area of 73 km² and comprises 14 settlements, including the central urban settlement of Čakovec, which has a population of 15,078, out of a total of 27,122 inhabitants (2021 census). The central settlement of Čakovec is spatially and functionally connected with several surrounding municipalities, while the southern boundary of the City is defined by the Čakovec Hydroelectric Plant reservoir, which also forms the natural border between Međimurje and Varaždin Counties.

The town's favorable geostrategic and transport location has historically influenced its economic and social development. Čakovec is well-connected by international, national, regional, and local road and rail infrastructure. Moreover, the town demonstrates a strong functional link with the City of Varaždin, forming an increasingly integrated urban conurbation. Their shared development area significantly affects migration, transport, and economic patterns in northwestern Croatia. As the largest and most populous town in the county, Čakovec serves as the primary driver of economic, demographic, and infrastructural development in Međimurje and, within a broader spatial context, stands out as a potential contact, transit, and development center with substantial urban capacities. With its natural diversity, rich landscape base, and notable architectural heritage, Čakovec represents a valuable space within the Republic of Croatia, requiring the protection and enhancement of its fundamental spatial, cultural, and environmental values.

3.2.2 Spatial Planning Documents and Strategic Documents

The first document guiding the development of the City of Čakovec was the Directive Regulatory Basis of 1947, prepared by architect Prof. Josip Seissel at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb. The plan established a new network of major town roads beyond the then town center, introduced new residential neighborhoods for both individual and collective housing, and designated an industrial zone to the northwest of the railway station. The plan was preceded by the preparation of an early form of a regional plan, which examined the spatial and transport connections of settlements in Međimurje and demographic trends, influencing the foundational layout of Čakovec itself (City of Čakovec, 2005; Kranjčević & Pintar, 2017).

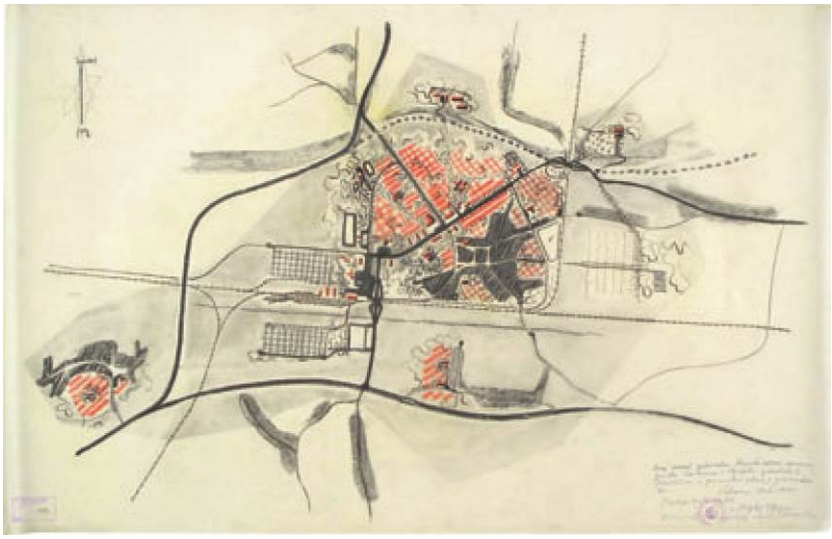

Fig. 1: Directive Regulatory Basis of 1947. Source: Archive of the Department.

The General Urban Plan (GUP) of 1964, prepared by the AR 59 project bureau under the leadership of architect Borisav Vasiljević, represents a revision of the 1947 Directive Regulatory Basis. The plan envisioned the southern expansion of the town beyond the railway line while integrating suburban settlements into the urban fabric. It disregarded the historic urban grid, permitting radical interventions that

resulted in the interpolation of residential blocks and the construction of high-rise buildings (City of Čakovec, 2005; Kranjčević & Pintar, 2017).

In 1978, the General Urban Plan of the City of Čakovec "Čakovec 2000", led by architect Nada Golub-Piližota, established a long-term development concept for the town until the end of the century. The plan defined new residential, industrial, and sports-recreational zones, established a pedestrian zone in the town center, and set the southern boundary of the town with the southern bypass. New residential quarters with distinct identities were created. The plan also implemented the concept of the Eastern Industrial Zone and the Mladost Sports and Recreation Center. Subsequently, the plan was supplemented under the title “General Urban Plan of Čakovec” (led by architect Dragomir Sutlar), which included the construction of the southern bypass and introduced building development restrictions (City of Čakovec, 2005).

The Spatial Plan of the Čakovec Municipality (1978) was the first plan to consider the integrated territory of Međimurje, which at the time constituted the unified Čakovec Municipality (corresponding to the current area of Međimurje County, 729 km²). To ensure conditions for overall social and economic development and to create equitable living and working opportunities for the entire population of the municipality, while adhering to the principles of environmental protection and improvement and rational and efficient spatial management, the plan established the following key objectives: Enable polycentric, efficient, and functional spatial development; Ensure coordinated and purpose-driven land use that supports optimal, stable, and sustainable economic development; Provide a high-quality environment for healthy and humane living while preserving aesthetic and cultural values; Safeguard the territory against potential disasters, hazards, and destruction. The plan proposed a new spatial model of a polycentric settlement system, with Čakovec as the primary center. By connecting settlements with each other and with all parts of the territory, the plan aimed to ensure optimal mobility of the population, accessibility to workplaces, and connectivity of all areas to Čakovec within 30 minutes. This framework was intended to facilitate the gradual restructuring of the population and to free land for intensive agricultural use (Sutlar & Grgan-Makovec, 2017).

The Amendment and Supplement to the Spatial Plan of the Čakovec Municipality (1989) was primarily linked to finding a suitable solution for the alignment of the A4 Budapest–Zagreb highway. When defining the corridor, attention was given to minimizing the impact on valuable agricultural land, avoiding the Murščak protected landscape, and respecting the settlement orientation toward Prelog and Čakovec, so that the highway would not become a barrier within the territory.

The current legislative framework for spatial planning and strategic development at the local level for the town encompasses several types of spatial and strategic development plans, the most significant of which are outlined below.

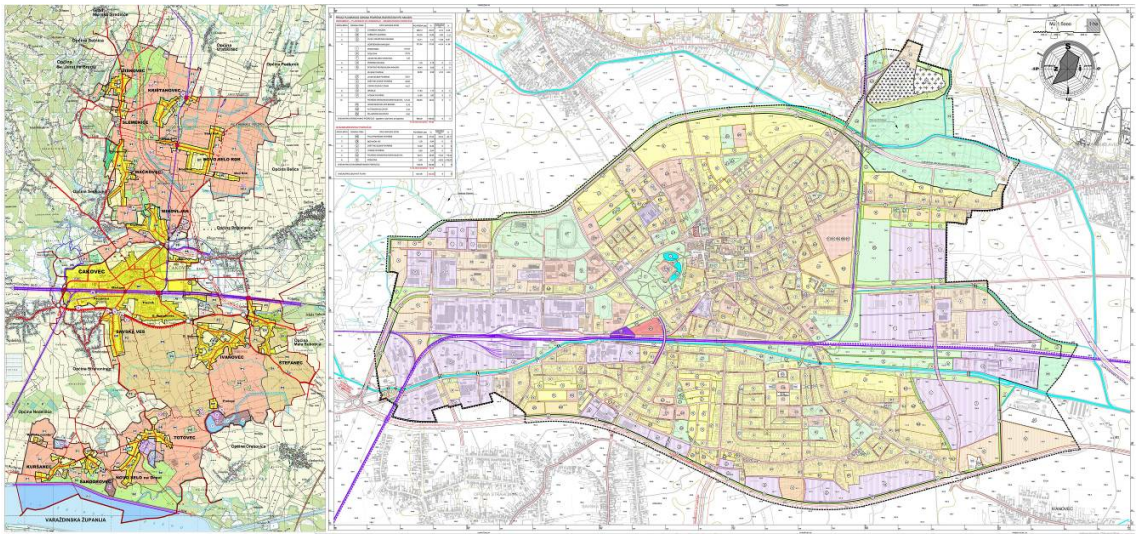

Fig. 2: The Spatial Plan of the City of Čakovec (left) and The General Urban Plan of Čakovec (right). Source: https://www.cakovec.hr/prostorni-planovi-grad-cakovec/

The Spatial Plan of the City of Čakovec (2003) defines the conditions for the development of the urban area, including its purposeful use, land use designation, spatial design, remediation of building and other land, environmental protection, and the protection of cultural heritage and particularly valuable natural areas

within the City's territory, which covers 72.97 km². The plan points out county-level spatial development objectives, including the development of the town and settlements with special functions and infrastructure systems, the rational use of natural resources, and the preservation of ecological stability and valuable environmental components. It also defines town-level spatial development objectives, which include demographic development aimed at promoting stable and sustainable population growth, settlement development, enhancement of social, transport, and utility infrastructure, and the protection of landscape, natural values, and cultural-historical units. Furthermore, the plan sets settlement-level spatial planning objectives within the town, which include the rational use and protection of space by directing land use to meet the town's needs, environmental protection, designation of building areas within settlements, and the improvement of settlement design and utility infrastructure to enhance the quality of life of residents.

The General Urban Plan of Čakovec (2005) establishes the fundamental spatial organization, the protection of natural, cultural, and historical values, and the use and designation of land for the central settlement area, covering 11.27 km². The plan emphasizes that Čakovec, as the county seat, should continue to function as the most important economic, administrative, cultural, educational, and healthcare center, as well as the largest transport hub of Međimurje County.

The plan defines the following key long-term objectives: Preserve the identity and specificity of the urban area; Protect natural and historical values, the environment, and promote sustainable development; Maintain undeveloped areas; Improve the quality of life and living standards of residents; Ensure space and corridors for all infrastructure to connect Čakovec with surrounding settlements, supporting its role as a regional center; Provide the spatial prerequisites for economic development and restructuring relevant to Čakovec and Međimurje County.

The primary goal of the plan is urban regeneration and consolidation of the town's structure. The plan emphasizes the need to: Enhance the spatial structure of the town at a human scale, ensuring good connectivity to all necessary urban functions; Spatially define the existing military zone (training grounds and barracks) and integrate it into the urban fabric with appropriate uses; Achieve urban quality through a system of urban-architectural projects; Use the town's space and environment in a way that prevents irreversible damage, enabling durable and sustainable development.

The plan specifies the following urban planning objectives: Ensure the development of all urban systems; Dimension spaces according to the scale of the town and moderate continuity of development; Promote construction that preserves cultural heritage and natural settings while highlighting urban aesthetics; Protect residents from adverse impacts while utilizing local environmental advantages; Align urban development with socio-economic programs; Ensure construction that supports economic efficiency of infrastructure systems and strengthens the town's economic capacity through functional distribution and overlap of urban functions.

The plan also identifies specific interventions: Expand areas for residential use (single-family and multi-family housing) in the northern parts of the town, Globetka, Sajmište, Martane, and Buzovec; Expand areas for economic, industrial, and business purposes east of Buzovec and on the former military training ground; Form and reconstruct the military barracks area for public and community buildings; Designate new multifunctional green spaces on undeveloped or abandoned agricultural land; Define zones to be regulated through detailed spatial plans; Provide space for the relocation of the bus and railway stations.

For the purposes of sustainable urban planning in line with European Union objectives and regional development criteria, the Čakovec Urban Area (covering 164.85 km²) has been defined, encompassing the City of Čakovec and the surrounding municipalities of Nedelišće, Strahoninec, Pribislavec, and Šenkovec. A Development Strategy for the Čakovec Urban Area has been prepared for the financial period 2021–2027. The medium-term vision for the Čakovec Urban Area emphasizes a resilient, innovative, and sustainable economy, as well as a healthy, educated, and inclusive society that promotes sustainable urban development to ensure a high-quality living environment. The strategy identifies three priority areas of public policy: Sustainable Economy; Healthy and Educated Society; and Pleasant Living Environment. Specific objectives have been established for each priority area: PP1 – Sustainable Economy: Development of entrepreneurship and supportive business infrastructure; strengthening of niche tourism; promotion of green solutions and smart innovations in the economy; PP2 – Healthy and Educated Society: Enhancement of lifelong learning; strengthening of sports infrastructure; improvement of quality of life through increased publicly accessible

amenities; and PP3 – Pleasant Living Environment: Development of cycling and pedestrian infrastructure; enhancement of green infrastructure; improvement and design of public spaces.

The Green Urban Renewal Strategy of the City of Čakovec 2022–2030 is aligned with the Development Strategy of the Čakovec Urban Area, and both documents contribute to achieving the strategic objectives of the National Recovery Strategy 2030 – Ecological and Energy Transition for Climate Neutrality. The strategy defines a vision for the development of green infrastructure in the City of Čakovec, including a development concept for both the wider and immediate urban area. Based on the identified developmental needs and potentials, as well as the established vision, three complementary and synergistic objectives for green infrastructure development have been defined. The strategy also establishes priorities for green urban renewal, specifying measures and proposed projects to be implemented within the town. The main strategic objectives of the strategy are: Increase the efficiency of planning and management of green infrastructure in the town; Improve, expand, and connect easily accessible green infrastructure within the town; and Create livable spaces and enhance the quality of life. By achieving these objectives, the strategy ensures the preservation and enhancement of the green character and identity of Čakovec and guarantees accessible green infrastructure of various types, sizes, and functions for all residents. Given the interconnected nature of the objectives, their implementation will foster a circular process, resulting in a continuous increase in interest and investment in green infrastructure development projects across the town.

3.2.3 Proposals for the Future Development Visions of the City of Čakovec

The following section offers a brief overview of two selected student projects, highlighting the distinct approaches and methodologies adopted by two different menor-led groups.

The project titled “Student Corridor Čakovec – Varaždin” (Figure 3) identifies, through the analysis of the broader spatial context, the need and potential for functional connectivity between the main cities of the neighboring counties, Čakovec and Varaždin. It proposes a joint campus in the eastern industrial zone of Čakovec and aims to enhance transport connectivity through pedestrian and cycling routes linking the two cities, as well as constructing an additional railway track for (inter)urban train services. Considering the concentration of existing higher education institutions and planned urban projects – including the Science Center, redevelopment of the former military barracks into a Creative-Inspirational Center, establishment of a business incubator, and the Međimurje Energy Center – the project proposes repurposing the industrial zone west of the railway into a new urban neighborhood with a student campus. The design envisions a new railway station along the eastern edge of a planned town park, which extends into a central east-west green axis. This axis is flanked by public service zones, such as the new campus with student dormitories, faculties, a primary school, kindergarten, library, and health center, and mixed residential and commercial zones. Peripheral roads in the northern and southern sections are planned for quiet residential areas with family houses, while the central axis culminates in a sports and recreational area forming a buffer zone toward the planned northern town bypass.

Fig. 3: “Student Corridor Čakovec – Varaždin” Vision for Čakovac (students: Petra Kujundžić & Ivan Kukuljević-Sakcinski; mentor: Damir Krajnik, PhD, Full Professor). Source: Archive of the Department.

The student vision entitled “En-park” (Figure 4) identifies multiple (E)layers that strategically aim to affirm Čakovec as a regional research and education center for biodiversity and nature protection, linked to the Mura-Drava Regional Park. The “En” acronym reflects adjectives describing the project’s values: ecological,

energy-resilient, educative, economic, efficient, eccentric, eclectic, experimental, expressive, and more. Students redesigned and integrated existing entrepreneurial zones, adding new educational, touristic, and business functions connected with urban green infrastructure (recreational areas, urban forests, and parks). At the regional level, Međimurje County was analyzed for three potential scenarios: depopulation, stagnation, and demographic growth. The study assessed the potential of built-up zones to become green infrastructure, agricultural land, or to expand. At the local level, the entrepreneurial zone in Čakovec East was planned in detail to integrate all aspects while considering existing and planned major road infrastructure. Integration changes were evaluated using the Space Syntax model, guiding students in selecting the most appropriate traffic solution between two proposed options.

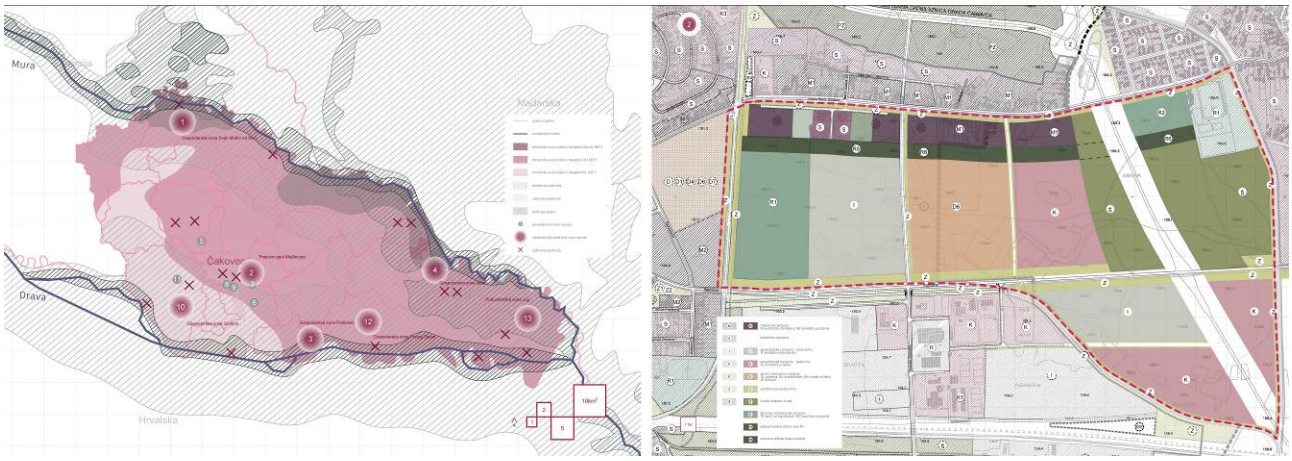

Fig. 4: "En-Park" Vision for Čakovac (students: Lara Prežgaj & Marija Pupovac; mentor: Tamara Zaninović, PhD, Assistant Professor). Source: Archive of the Department.

4 DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the most significant ECTP-CEU and AESOP documents related to spatial planning education, a set of comparison criteria was established. These criteria were derived through the synthesis of thematic categories presented in the documents, whereby competency domains and educational objectives were grouped into broader analytical units applicable to the analysis of Urban Planning Workshop 1: Settlement Planning focused on the topic of small towns' spatial vision.

Document analysis demonstrates a strong consensus in understanding the role, scope, and expected outcomes of spatial planning education, despite varying institutional frameworks. While ECTP-CEU approaches planning primarily through the lens of professional competencies and practice standards, AESOP offers an educational framework that integrates theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and the ethical values necessary for socially responsible planning. Within this context, UPW1 serves as a key platform for acquiring both theoretical and applied academic knowledge, simulating professional spatial planning practice.

A central objective of this education is the development of students' ability to integrate spatial, social, economic, and environmental systems, particularly across scales ranging from regional to local. UPW1 functions as a pedagogical instrument that allows students to explore complex spatial dynamics, synthesize knowledge across multiple domains, and translate these insights into foundational visions and concepts for the further development of the selected area.

Research competencies are similarly emphasized across educational frameworks, highlighting the capacity for independent inquiry, critical evaluation, and the translation of research into action and spatial transformation. In addition to the foundational investigations conducted in UPW1, Research Seminar 1 provides an opportunity for deeper, topic-specific research. Students independently explore themes relevant to their chosen area and communicate the entire research process through seminar papers grounded in scientific methodology.

Methodological and technical competencies are also central, with documents underscoring the importance of mastering analytical tools, planning techniques, and legal and institutional instruments, as well as applying them in practice from drafting plans to participating in implementation processes. UPW11 is particularly instrumental in this regard, enabling students to apply analytical methods, employ planning instruments, and

develop the capacity for spatially informed decision-making. Through exercises in strategic thinking, the formulation of development visions, and the proposal of their potential realization using planning tools, students acquire crucial skills for professional practice, making this a pivotal component in the education of future spatial planners.

Both documents recognize the importance of visualization, communication skills, and participation as integral components of planning competence. In this context, UPW1 plays a key role by enabling the integration of analytical work, spatial concepts, and visual presentation into a coherent planning product. Special attention is also given to the creation of a conceptual model to further develop students' abilities to visualize solutions at different scales. Engagement of experts and the local community in the planning process is integrated through organized site visits, guest lectures, presentations, and the curation of exhibitions and publications of selected student works.

Furthermore, both documents strongly emphasize professional ethics, social responsibility, and the value-based dimension of planning. UPW1 can be seen as a didactic space in which the ethical and value-oriented principles of planning are concretized through decisions on spatial priorities, stakeholder involvement, and the interpretation of the public interest in proposed spatial solutions.

While UPW1 primarily focuses on the formulation of spatial visions and planning concepts, real-world spatial planning extends beyond the development of plans to their concrete implementation. The success of planning proposals depends on institutional procedures, financial capacities, and the engagement of public and private development actors, which may significantly reshape initial concepts. Although the workshop setting cannot fully simulate these complex dynamics, students are introduced to existing statutory and strategic frameworks as instruments that shape spatial transformation. A more explicit reflection on implementation conditions and constraints could further strengthen the connection between planning education and professional practice.

The conducted research demonstrates that Čakovec, as a representative small town, possesses a long-standing history of spatial planning. Its further development was already considered in the first half of the 20th century within a broader regional context, underscoring its considerable spatial and economic significance for northern Croatia even at that time. Subsequent interventions in the urban fabric, which substantially transformed the town's character during the second half of the 20th century, were largely driven by modifications in the spatial planning framework. These interventions provide illustrative examples of specific planning practices that warrant critical reflection when envisaging future urban development. Furthermore, strategic planning documents at both the regional and local levels offer a structured basis for analyzing and evaluating previously established development objectives, thereby supporting the formulation and refinement of a coherent vision for the town's future growth.

Student reflections on the future development of Čakovec adopt a variety of approaches, ranging from regional-scale concepts that consider natural and socio-economic characteristics, to site-specific solutions, such as brownfield areas, which have contributed to shaping the broader spatial development framework of the town.

The analysis of student work shows that UPW1 fosters the development of key planning competencies, particularly in the area of integrated spatial and socio-economic processes understanding. The projects are notable for their analytical rigor and synthetic ability, effectively translating spatial analyses into strategic development concepts and urban plans as planning instruments. There is a clear capacity to work across different spatial scales and to integrate environmental considerations and principles of sustainable development into the proposed solutions.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the conducted research, it can be concluded that small towns, such as Čakovec in this study, provide an appropriate context for education in spatial planning. They are large enough to encompass the complexity of spatial, social, and economic processes, yet small enough to remain comprehensible as a whole and analytically manageable.

Towns of this size and position within the hierarchy of spatial systems enable the development of a broad range of competencies as defined by relevant European documents on spatial planning education, while simultaneously providing space for experimentation and innovative planning approaches. The experiences

gained through working on small-town planning within the educational process can serve as a solid foundation for the later application of planning methods and concepts in more complex, larger urban contexts.

In this sense, Urban Planning Workshop 1: Settlement Planning can be interpreted as an integrative learning platform that effectively links theoretical knowledge, planning practice, and the value-based principles of spatial planning. At the same time, spatial planning education should acknowledge that the development of plans represents only one phase of the overall planning process. Their realization depends on implementation mechanisms, financial frameworks, governance structures, and the active engagement of development actors, all of which ultimately shape spatial outcomes. Strengthening students' understanding of these conditions and constraints would therefore further enhance the educational model, enabling a more critical and practice-oriented connection between planning concepts and their real-world implementation.

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