

Luca Frei

Report on Workshop "Garden" (re:public)

[09/03]

#1

The group I am working with is the class 5b from the Second Specialised Boarding School in Riga. The children are Sabine, Jvans, Juris, Iveta, Martins, Janis, Sergejs, Kristina, Jolanta and Diana and are all between the age of 8 and 12.

On WEDNESDAY and THURSDAY we went out together for the walks around the school, the area is in the Latgale district and is one of the poorest in Riga, its inhabitants are for the most part gypsies and (so I have been told) there is a lot of unemployment, drug dealing and prostitution.

For the walks we made 4 groups and each group had a camera to document the environment. For everyone it was the first time they used one camera so they were very excited. I stuck labels onto the cameras where they would write their name, so I/we could recognise who made the photographs.

First we went to the small park where our garden is going to be, this is 3 minutes from the school. From there we went off. Most of the photographs are group and single portraits in front of houses, trees. There are a lot of cats in the area so there are also a lot of photographs of cats. We are accompanied by a very old school pedagogue, but she is very happy with the idea of the project.

The second day we take a different route, always starting from the school then going to the garden and off from there again. This time the walk is more relaxed, it's a very beautiful sunny and warm day and everyone is happy, two pedagogues are with us this time, we are told by Juris that they are very severe but they seem to like them anyway.

THURSDAY I bring the prints of the photographs taken on Wednesday the situation is very agitated, but when I bring back the photographs of the Thursday walk on Friday the environment is already calmer.

FRIDAY is also the day when we do the map, based on the walks we have made and using for reference the photographs and each one's memory.

We divide the photographs (more than 200) in groups: the sport hall, the Jewish cemetery, the train station, park 1, park 2, the bridge above the railway, etc... This helped to remember the different places we went to.

While the group sorts the photographs I start to glue together big sheets of paper for the maps. When we are all finished with the preparation we can start with the maps. It takes a while to get started, but after sometimes almost everyone is into their work, with me and Kristaps (my precious assistant!) assisting them with the work. The maps will be finished on Monday (eventually on TUESDAY).

#2

This second working week continues what we started last week, but is also the laboratory week, in which we work towards the conception and the planning of the garden which will be opened on the 6th September.

On MONDAY we continued the maps and for Tuesday I've prepared a small "questionnaire" that directed towards the idea of the garden, the questions were very simple and could be replied with words or drawings.

From the questionnaire we got 11 names for the garden, 11 ways to use it and 11 ways it could look. So this is our starting point.

Along with the questionnaire on TUESDAY we also started to put together the photo archive book. The children are very attached to this part of the project and were very keen to get started with it. My initial idea was that the archive should be kept together but I am not sure this will possible! (Maybe we'll need to make an extra copy of the photographs for the children that they can keep so that the archive can remain together).

On WEDNESDAY we continued and finished the photo archive book and the maps. After that we spent some time looking at what was done so far and talked about the preparation for the garden: there will be quite some activities like dancing, play football, learning to ride the bike and in-line skate, we'll have tea for the visitors, we'll have a lot of paper planes with messages written on them, tents, balloons, and we'll have plants and flowers which will be given to the visitors as presents.

During the same days I developed a basic structure around which the garden will be realised, this consist of 11 banners linked together by wooden poles (the banners 150 cm long and the wooden poles 200 cm high).

On the banners there is the names that each in the group has given to the garden, this we made on THURSDAY. The names were painted with acrylic paint. After a while it all got quite messy but it was fun! The banners were started and finished on the same day, but perhaps someone want to continue next week.

For FRIDAY I announced that we'll do a game together. I prepared the room with an overhead projector and brought with me transparent coloured plastics, pens and various objects. After a moment of confusion the room go extremely active. Martins and Janis also started to make masks for themselves with the transparent plastic and at one moment the projection became an animated scenography.

The second week has ended! Next week will focus on the physical preparation for the garden, it will be good to begin the physical work also because the school start on MONDAY and since we'll meet from 12 to 14, right after classes and before lunch, it will be good to do something outside the classroom.

#3

MONDAY was the first day of school after the summer holidays and since during that day there were "beginning of the year ceremonies" taking place we decided to meet on TUESDAY instead.

On TUESDAY we went through the plans for the week and discussed practical ideas for the garden, which will be celebrated with a small public event on SATURDAY. I handed to the group the archive/diary of the excursions and we looked at it all together. The students decided to give it to their teacher Cinthia, she has been with them since the beginning and will be with them throughout the course of their studies.

We left the classroom and walked to the shop Darza Paudale (Garden World) to buy flowers and plants. Iveta and Jolanta were the responsible and decided for 20 garden roses.

WEDNESDAY we went directly to the site where we were going to make our garden. I've brought with me a young apple tree and a small pine tree. Since there were many in the surroundings we

often communicated using apples or apple trees as a starting point. Iveta decided to have the apple tree planted in the middle of the green area and having it surrounded by the small roses, in another spot the same to be made with the pine tree. Everyone contributed to the planting operation, the neighbours with candies and the local green areas care takers helped in disposing of the earth we dugged out from the ground. When finished we returned to the school with the tools and washed our hands.

THURSDAY we had a small tent workshop in the school yard. I must admit that since most of this and the previous week it had been raining the moral was a bit down and all were a bit frustrated... and tired...

On FRIDAY morning the tent is not where we left it on THURSDAY in the school yard. I ask Diana, one of the tent responsible, and she says she took it indoor because she was afraid someone would steal it. We assembled in the class room and then left directly for the garden where Diana worked on a new tent and I started to stick the banners with the names that each children has given to the garden into the ground.

Everyone was busy doing things, some planned and other improvised, alone or in groups. Other children from the neighbourhood came asking what we were doing and stayed around playing and helping here and there.

At 5 we had to finish working and brought back our tools to the school, half an hour later on my way back to catch the tram I went by the garden and the tent and the banners were all destroyed!

The only thing to do was to wait until the day after...

SATURDAY morning was a bit foggy but by eleven the sun was high up in the sky. This was the day of our small event/celebration of the garden. After having bought some more practical things for the day like plastic cups and garden tables, I went to school to meet with the children. I explained what happened the evening before, that the tents and the banners were destroyed, the children were quite upset (after all it was a whole afternoon's work!), but I am sure in some ways they also expected it.

We remade our garden in no time, actually this time we made two tents! (Diana always very active leading this part of the garden).

Other children of the neighbourhood helped us a lot with the reconstruction.

Once finished we layed the maps that we made on the ground inside the tents, displayed a reproduction of the archive on a table, and handed out leaflets about the garden to the visitors, most of them were from the neighbourhood and very curious about what we did.

Then Juris and I went to buy refreshments and back to the garden I started to serve the soft drinks, suddently the situation got out of control!

Everyone seemed to explode of energy at the same time, playing football, doing acrobatic numbers, blowing balloons, explaining the archive to the curious, handing out the leaflets, etc... Unfortunately not all went as planned, we organised to have a bike so that Martins and others could learn to ride, and the bike never arrived...(!), also Sabine who made paper planes with messages written on them couldn't come.

On SUNDAY on my way to the school I walked through the site of the garden and saw that nothing of it was left, all got stolen in the night.

We met in the school's courtyard, everyone knew already that all got stolen, but even though it was a bit sad we accepted it... in the end we had a very good day!

Again it was a very beautiful and warm afternoon, everyone was in a good mood and we decided

to go for a walk to the places we visited in our first two days, this time backwards. It was very exciting to see the places again together, this time we also went to visit to the local Russian Orthodox church and the cemetery.

[from: luca frei, *news/letter #3*]