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**Teenage perspectives on urban environments.
Case studies from contemporary Bucharest**

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Abstract

The urban environment is a product of everyday social practices and interactions but, at the same time, it conditions social practices and interactions. The article explores the position of the youth in this reciprocal process, drawing on a study involving more than 100 children and teenagers (pupils from Grades 4-11) from 2 elementary schools and 2 high schools in Bucharest. The research followed several lines of investigation: their knowledge of and sensitivity to pollution and nature; the place attachments young people develop to urban natural environments; sound ecology and the teenagers' practices in relation to the sounds of the city. The data were collected through action-research, while the researchers were taking part in various social projects.

Key words: youth, place attachment, knowledge-possession-empowerment model

1. Urban life and urban environments

As most of the world's people now live in cities (United Nations Population Division, 2009), their relationship with the natural environments is marked by extensive transformations: rural landscapes are pushed into the background while urban landscapes gradually “take centre stage” and become the headquarters of social reality; on the other hand, continuities between rural and urban natural elements transcend the limits between villages and cities (Allen, 2003). The quality of life for most of the world's people is now directly related to the quality of urban environments. In this context, the natural elements are vital – both as health factors and factors for future social development (Worldwatch Institute, 2007). While drafting both local and global policies, the urban planners, architects and landscape architects are still debating the elements to be counted as urban natural elements (Tudora, 2009); parks, gardens, green street-arrangements, waste grounds reclaimed by vegetation, and water-side locations are the main elements taken into consideration. Beyond the conceptual debates, their impact on all levels of social life – physical and mental health at the individual level, everyday practices and social interactions at the micro- and mezzo-social level, economic activities and the resource heritage for future generations at the macro-social level – is universally recognized (Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, 1986; Commission of the European Communities, 1990).

At the same time, the urban natural environment is a product of social action: legislative frameworks, administrative decisions, urban planning interventions and development projects all have the power to dramatically reshape the natural environment; everyday practices and social interactions have the power to construct, negotiate and attach meaning to the surrounding natural elements, constantly reinventing them. Thus, cities and their inhabitants depend on nature, while they also transform it (Cronon, 1991).

In the last decades, the awareness of these continuous reciprocal relationships between environment and social life have led to the emergence of new approaches and the development of new understandings of the environment, social actions, and their reciprocity; environmental behaviours are examples of such approaches. They involve the conscious re-direction of social activities – ranging from everyday practices to global

intervention – towards conserving, improving or reconstructing the environment (Mobley et al., 2009), which, in turn, will improve social life in the long term. The growing popularity of environmental behaviours is reflected in the recent introduction of environmental education at different education levels (from kindergarten to university), the proliferation of civic associations, media channels and artistic projects promoting it, the adoption of environmental approaches in national and global policy papers, and the growing interest for social research on them (Chiriac et al., 2009).

The present article is a reflection of this growing interest by social researchers in environmental behaviours. The corresponding study was based on an interdisciplinary approach, at the crossroads between social anthropology, social psychology, participative planning, social policy and community development studies.

The Bucharest context

The article explores the perceptions, knowledge, symbolic meanings, social needs, daily and exceptional practices related to environmental issues of the young inhabitants of contemporary Bucharest. It is far from an exhaustive study of the reciprocal processes between urban environments and social constructions, but it opens up a debate on how the younger generations – the builders of the future city – are involved in these processes.

Nevertheless, the younger generations will shape the future of the city on the basis and framework of the present city. The development of their environmental perceptions and behaviours is conditioned by and associated with the present social realities of Bucharest. Below, I mention several such characteristics of the contemporary city, revealing for the purpose of the present exploration.

Local critical theorists and analysts draw attention to the general loss of interest in the common and public goods in Romanian cities and especially in Bucharest (Mihali, 2005; Mihali, 2006; Ghiu, 2008a). In the last two decades, this general loss of interest has been manifested either through the abandon of public goods, or through the privatization and private competition involving them. Public spaces and urban natural environments are the most affected urban elements throughout these social changes (Mihali, 2007;

Ghiu, 2008b). Real-estate pressures on the one hand and a lack of investment and resources (financial and human) on the other have led to a decrease in such spaces, the absence of new ones and the degradation of existing ones. Peri-urban and semi-private natural environments are also diminishing or in decline, due to urban sprawl and the pressure of building projects, respectively: the city's green belts, semi-private gardens and outer-city green areas (e.g. private gardens and areas for public use, owned by schools, universities, hospitals and other institutions) are directly affected (Tudora, 2009). In Bucharest, from 1989 to 2007, a total of 1,500,000 trees were cut down and not replanted (The Civic Platform "Împreună pentru un oraș mai bun", 2007).

As an ecological consequence, the urban green zones in Bucharest are fragmented, isolated, and unable to maintain bio-diversity or host healthy micro-ecosystems. As a social consequence, the green spaces in Bucharest are unable to respond to the many needs of the inhabitants with regard to urban natural environments (Chiriac et al., 2009). These vital needs are mainly connected with health (clean air, practicing sports), education (about the physical, social and symbolic environment), socialization, diversification of the urban experience, and entertainment (Kaplan, 1983). The precarious supply of green spaces in Bucharest turns the few remaining ones into highly desired and popular places; these are usually full of people coming from different districts, some of them spending even more than one hour to get there.

Other environmental issues add to the complex realities of Bucharest: 1) at the macro-social level, the perpetual incoherence of municipal decisions, the inefficient waste management and underdeveloped waste-recycling infrastructure, and the inappropriate conditions for eco-friendly means of transport; 2) at the mezzo-social level, traffic pollution, phonic pollution, corrupt interference in the implementation of urban strategies, and inefficient energy management in blocks of flats, due to the poor quality of building materials; 3) at the individual level, perpetually irresponsible consumer practices and a scarcity of community-based environmental initiatives (Stanciu, 2009).

Nevertheless, there always have been/are individuals and action-groups that care about these problems and try to find solutions. The range of their activities is wide: some deal with informing the population and the decision-makers about the complexity of the problems; some deal with challenging the out-dated regulations and strategies, still being

implemented in urban planning; some deal with educational projects; some deal directly with environmental action such as tree-planting, recycling, and efficient building developments; some deal with mediating and catalyzing the negotiations among the different actors involved in environmental problems (The Civic Platform *Împreună pentru un oraș mai bun*”, 2008). European integration not only stimulates but demands these initiatives, promoting the key terms of sustainable/durable urban development and urban regeneration (Ipati, 2007). Contact with international environmental platforms (e.g. Greenpeace, WWF, European Youth for Action), the globalized circulation of environmental values, and new financial opportunities have contributed to and inspired the setting up of a few national environmental platforms, most of them based in Bucharest; some of them are now associated with popular public figures (music stars and charismatic opinion leaders).

This new wave of environmental approaches is strongly directed towards the younger generations and mostly involves representatives of these generations; for example, a content analysis of most web-sites dedicated to environmental associations and actions (observing the age of different members and participants) would confirm this statement – but this would be the goal for another research project/paper. Among the changes generated by this wave of environmental approaches, an important one was the nationwide introduction of “ecology” as an optional course at primary, grammar school, and high-school level, in 2008; the decade before, “ecology” was only taught in vocational secondary schools or introduced as short chapters in biology or geography manuals (Green Report, 2008).

Despite this well-intended strategy, ecological education – as an optional course – remains dependent on the resources of each school, the reason why not all pupils are offered the same access to ecological knowledge. The poorer schools, serving poorer/problematic neighbourhoods and thus children from rather disadvantaged households (Bădescu et al. 2007), also have fewer resources (and chances) to successfully implement such optional courses, sometimes due to scarce human resources, other times due to scarce material/practical resources. This shortcoming in formal ecological education is compounded with the shortcomings in the informal education of children from poor neighbourhoods: their reduced access to books, the limited knowledge-sharing

in their households, and their limited direct access to natural environments due to lower spatial mobility (i.e. longer distances to the parks and public gardens situated mostly in central neighbourhoods, fewer financial resources to visit natural environments outside the city). On the other hand, children from better resourced households usually attend better resourced schools, thus their access to both formal and informal ecological education is more likely.

The entire sub-chapter above illustrates that the young people's direct and indirect or symbolic contact with urban nature is filtered through the contextual characteristics of Bucharest's social reality.

2. Inquiries and key-concepts regarding teenage environmental perspectives

Exploring further, the paper tries to illustrate what shapes the knowledge, sensitivities and sense of responsibility that young people have towards urban natural environments and what conditions trigger some of their environmental behaviours.

The study follows several interconnected lines of inquiry. First, it explores the ways teenagers perceive and are aware of environmental problems – assessing how wide and how deep their *knowledge* of the problems is. Secondly, it explores the needs and resources the teenagers identify/perceive in certain out-door public spaces, analysing whether they identify natural elements as resources and as desired elements – assessing what kind of *sensitivity* they have towards these natural elements. At the same time, the study looks at the relationships they develop with certain familiar public and semi-public spaces in the city – assessing their *place attachments*. The study then follows up one of the environmental problems that the teenagers identified and considered important: acoustic ecology. It explores their perceptions on noise and sound pollution thus revealing not only how far they are from *assuming responsibility* but also their problematic passage from gaining knowledge to taking action.

In an attempt to offer possible answers to these lines of inquiry, the present study employs a corpus of interconnected theoretical explanations. The choice of these specific theoretical explanations and interconnected concepts was guided by the following considerations: their strong influence on contemporary approaches to explaining,

improving and enhancing environmental behaviours (Ryan, 2005); their current relevance, in as much as they are present or cited in current issues (2010) of leading journals in the field (e.g. “Environment and Behaviours”, “Environment and Urbanization”, “Journal of Education for Sustainable Development”); their complementary qualities in explaining social reality mechanisms; and what I believe to be their relevance to the contemporary context in Bucharest, their capacity to reveal instrumental conclusions for future intervention and policy design. Focusing on this specific corpus of inter-coherent theoretical lines, the present paper does not contain an extended literature review; to a certain extent, this is a limitation and an aspect to be considered for future, more elaborate papers.

In the last two decades, Hungerford and Volk’s (1990) three-dimensional psycho-social model of environmental behaviours and environmental citizenship has been among the most influential in the field (Mobley et al., 2009). The model argues that there are three levels of conditions leading to environmental behaviours – that is, leading to conscious practices aiming to solve known environmental issues. The first level involves knowledge of problematic environmental situations/issues and sensitivity towards (or caring about) the natural environment; the second implies a sense of possession regarding (at least some) environmental issues, i.e. a feeling that those issues have become personal to a certain extent; the last level of conditions needed to catalyze action is empowerment, which involves taking opportunities to act.

The present paper proposes an enrichment of this three-dimensional psycho-social model, with the socio-anthropological concept of “place attachment”, as defined and introduced by Shumaker and Taylor (1983). This human bonding oriented towards personally and socially meaningful places, and thus towards the environment, is considered to require knowledge, sensitivity and possession in relation to a certain place/environment, while, in turn, it stimulates the accumulation of knowledge, sensitivity and a sense of possession. Place attachment to natural environments has been known about and researched in the social sciences for over two decades (Mitchell et al., 1993), while in the last decade place attachment to urban natural environments has been revealed by qualitative and quantitative social studies, in different cities around the world (Vorkinn and Riese, 2001; Ryan, 2005; among others).

The development of place attachment depends on the specific space/spatial characteristics, the general knowledge of nature, and the specific familiarities with/experiences lived in that specific space (Shumaker and Taylor, 1983). Thus, place attachment is not a homogenized category but it includes different forms of bonding with the environment. Mitchell et al. (1993) have identified: 1) use-oriented attachments, characterising bindings that are triggered by the specific functions, needs, and uses satisfied by those places; the place itself is perceived as less important than its use; 2) place-oriented attachments, characterizing bindings triggered by the familiarities and experiences lived in the specific places; the place in itself is perceived as the central element of the bond; 3) concept-oriented attachments, in which the bindings are triggered by certain principles/beliefs animating the individuals and are involved in the symbolic meanings of the specific places; the place itself is perceived as less important than the principles it represents.

As shown, people develop different forms of attachment to different places. Attachments are not fixed but flexible, allowing gradual transformations with time or rapid changes in special conditions. In addition to this variety of forms, any kind of place attachment makes a sense of possession on issues involving the respective environment more possible (Vorkinn and Riese, 2001); this is also valid for urban natural environments. In regard to urban natural environments, Ryan (2005) concludes that people develop different attachments to them, i.e. different sensitivities, possession and empowerment over the issues emerging there. Use-oriented attachments to urban natural environments are associated with rather passive environmental behaviours; place-oriented attachments are associated with narrow place-specific environmental behaviours, and concept-oriented attachments are associated with environmental activism.

Decoding the data concerning Bucharest teenagers – the builders of the future city – and their environmental perspectives and behaviours, according to the key offered by the theoretical concepts presented above, the paper highlights a few observations and presents them for debate. First, most of the pupils involved in the study know what pollution is and are familiar with certain urban environmental problems; their knowledge – formal and informal – is a key first-level factor for environmental behaviour (Mobley et al., 2009) but it is not sufficient to trigger it (Hungerford and Volk, 1983). Second, most

of the pupils involved experience different forms of place attachment, developing certain degrees of environmental knowledge, sensitivity and possession in relation to urban natural elements (e.g. parks, trees, plants) but their attachments are rarely concept-oriented, with most being either place-oriented or use-oriented. Third, many pupils do in fact take environmental action, though in specific conditions usually associated with group activities, familiar places or entertainment opportunities.

Finally, a more general observation that this paper presents for debate is that Bucharest teenagers develop different sensitivities, possessions and ways of taking action, just as Ryan (2005) observed in his US case studies. Environmental education and civic education in Bucharest, Romania and the rest of the world – otherwise frequently criticized for their narrow approach (Hungerford and Volk, 1990) – would have a lot to gain from building upon and caring for all the different sensitivities, possessions and empowerment-triggers that teenagers can develop.

3. Research methodology

The discussion this paper intends to initiate has its starting point in a three-year qualitative study (2007-2010). The subjects were/are teenagers, pupils from two elementary schools and two high schools in Bucharest, in Grades 4-11 (12-17 years old). The study focused on this age group because teenagers are the most intensive users of urban natural environments and their relationship with these environments has a strong formative, (informal) educational impact on their personal and social development (Talen and Coffindaffer, 1999). As stated above, teenagers are the future builders of cities and societies, and their generations represent a valuable growth resource (Jans, 2004). Thus, studying their relationship with the urban environment is a necessary step for any development strategy.

About 100 teenagers were included in the study, self-selected on a voluntary basis from each of the grades mentioned. What they all have in common is their attendance at ecology classes and participation (as beneficiaries) in extra-curricular activities organized the same civic association, one that I was collaborating with. They are differentiated by other social and demographic variables: age (a fairly equal distribution over the ages of

12 to 17 years), gender (fairly equal participation by boys and girls), ethnic group (about 30% of the participants were Roma), economic status (with a fairly equal distribution between severe poverty to a high level of well-being), residential area (ranging from the peripheries of Bucharest, through “dormitory” neighbourhoods, to the city centre), school performance (ranging from low to high), and personal development plans and opportunities (ranging from narrow alternatives to multiple opportunities). As this was an exploratory and qualitative study, mainly based on anthropological research instruments, an in-depth analysis of different teenage perspectives and behaviours was the main concern when the research methodology was being designed, even more so than the concern for a statistically representative sample of Bucharest’s teenage population; that would be a suitable subject for future studies and quantitative researches.

The four educational institutions included as case studies were two high schools, one located in the city centre and the other at the boundary between the city centre and an old residential neighbourhood, and two elementary schools, one located on the periphery of the city and Ferentari (Bucharest’s poorest district), and the other at the boundary between Ferentari and the city centre. Of the two high schools, the first is labelled as an elite institution; admission is conditioned by high exam marks and it represents one of the most desirable high schools for better-off Bucharest pupils. The curriculum is aimed at preparing the pupils to become decision makers and opinion leaders (as members of the board of directors, some parents and many pupils told the research team). The other is considered a good high school and is attended by pupils with varied socio-economic backgrounds. Of the two elementary schools selected, the first is labelled as one of the most problematic schools in Bucharest. It is surrounded by ghetto-like social realities, attended mostly by children and teenagers from the neighbouring disadvantaged area (social housing in the form of blocks of flats), with low levels of school performance, a high percentage of Roma pupils, and personnel not sufficiently qualified to face the complex problems surrounding the educational process. The other is a richer school, with private sponsors and extra-curricular programmes, and is attended by a diversity of pupils; but it is this socio-economic diversity that sometimes triggers tensions and conflict among the children, the teenagers and even their families (as teachers and pupils complained and the research team also witnessed in the field).

The selection of the educational institutions was based on three criteria: first, the inclusion of a variety of cases and research subjects (from Ferentari to the city centre, from poor to wealthy etc.); second, the insurance of a certain amount of support and co-operation from the school personnel in order to make the research feasible; third, the possibility to ensure a pragmatic outcome from the research that would be useful for all the participants (pupils, teachers, researchers and volunteers) and, indirectly, the environment. Thus, the selection was not based on representative sampling but on opportunity sampling, which is specific to qualitative and anthropology-oriented inquiries. Moreover, the selection of schools where the encounter between researchers and teenage subjects led to applicable pragmatic results added value to the entire research. This is specific to the participatory action-research approach.

The action-research approach

The case studies used the participatory action-research methodology in order to explore teenage environmental perspectives and behaviours in greater depth. Thus, the data collection was combined with participation in several social projects, involving about 100 teenagers, for more than three years. The researcher also assumed the position of a collaborative youth-worker in these projects, which were carried out in the four schools selected. In this manner, the research acquired a reformative aim/role: to offer the urban youth a deeper insight into the environment and their relationship with it and, at the same time, an opportunity to re-evaluate their daily practices in relation to the urban environment – one first step in improving them or substituting them with more sustainable alternatives.

As a participant action-researcher, I 1) helped a grass-roots association to develop non-formal civic education projects in the four schools, offering guidance and my knowledge of the social sciences; 2) performed non-formal education work with the teenagers, helping them understand different social mechanisms and phenomena (e.g. globalization, diversity, exclusion, urban planning, decision-making processes, urban agglomeration etc.) and helping the association to implement the projects; and 3) observed the teenagers, their spontaneously declared perceptions, their activities and

reactions, while also informally questioning them, in groups, about their different experiences with the urban environments. I was always in direct contact with the association's members, volunteers and beneficiaries (the teenagers), as well as with the school personnel. I took part in most project actions, thus being in the field about three days every week.

A more detailed analysis of this participatory action-research process and its phases, advantages and limits requires, once again, a separate paper, with a stronger methodological character. For the purposes of this paper, the following paragraphs briefly illustrate the main projects participated in.

The first projects "School Cinema" and "Mobile Cinema" helped teenagers to identify and understand the social problems in their city and neighbourhoods, while/through analysing and producing video materials. "Cultures from around the Block" encouraged the teenagers to explore the cultural diversity of Bucharest and illustrate it through media – audio, photo and web – installations. The "School of Creativity" was a broad project with many participants and varied activities, including various occasional environmental activities such as collecting rubbish, planting and taking care of plants, exploring urban wildlife through photography, and participating as observers in larger environmental actions (protests, social campaigns). "Our City – Our Decision" explained participative urban planning to teenagers and involved them in imaginative planning exercises with architecture and landscaping students; in the second phase of the project, assisted by students, the teenagers actually implemented a few of the interventions imagined. "Closer to the Future" continued the previous project, adding a self-reflexive dimension to it. Its participants had to think about, analyse and explain their relationships with different elements in their urban environment (e.g. objects, places, other people, changes, sounds). Finally, the most recent project, "Ekomunitas" taught children and teenagers in Ferentari about recycled art and the story of waste.

While taking part in the projects, I performed the research part of the action-research using various instruments. Participative observation and informal group interviews (similar to focus-groups) were continuously employed. Another frequently used research instrument was the basic content interpretation of the photographic, video and audio materials and personal maps produced by the participants. At the same time,

the preferences and reactions that the teenagers manifested towards the others' materials were considered additional input/clues. During "Cultures from around the Block" and "Closer to the Future", the young participants were stimulated to write self-analytic texts on urban topics and diary-like notes; then, the content of these texts was included in the study. Short questionnaires with open questions were sometimes used during "Our City – Our Decision" and "Closer to the Future". These two projects also involved "urban promenades" (walks and excursions) and the exploration of unfamiliar places, aimed at stimulating site-specific social design analysis and comparative analysis.

All the participants, who were self-selected, were aware of being involved in work-in-progress projects combining social action, learning and research. Action-research allowed the triangulation of such varied research instruments, which in turn facilitated the accumulation of a great deal of data. The most revealing data for the present inquiry – about teenagers' environmental knowledge, sensitivity and empowerment in relation to place attachment – are selected in the following chapter.

4. Findings on teenage environmental perspectives in contemporary Bucharest

In the present paper, environmental knowledge and sensitivity, place attachment, possession of environmental problems, and empowerment are understood as interconnected social characteristics. However, for the purpose of efficiently organizing the research data, these characteristics will be presented in separate sub-chapters.

Environmental knowledge

All the teenagers involved in the projects had and manifested some knowledge of environmental issues. Various group tasks on connected topics such as the elements of urban life, the problems of Bucharest, the possible future development of Bucharest, Romania and the world clearly illustrated the teenagers' levels of knowledge.

Throughout the projects, when discussing, photographing or filming the elements of urban life, all the youngsters included pollution and waste in their assessments. When discussing, photographing or filming the problems they encountered while living in

Bucharest, they all referred to or visually illustrated: air pollution, waste, sound pollution, traffic jams, scarcity of natural oases and the difficulties involved in using bicycles or roller skates. Some also complained about the air pollution and smells coming from the rubbish dumps on the edge of Bucharest. The few high school pupils with a deeper interest in architecture and planning, from both high-schools, referred to the urban sprawl that is destroying the green belt around Bucharest, the large inner-city buildings affecting the urban infrastructure, and the quasi-legal construction on green spaces and lake fronts.

The pollution of urban and peri-urban lakes was also mentioned as an important problem; the teenagers explained how they had actually witnessed the degeneration of the lakes as they grew up. On the other hand, the Dâmbovița River was only rarely mentioned as an important element in Bucharest and its pollution problems were hardly discussed at all. This might reflect the scarcity of symbolic meanings associated with the banks of the river – possibly because their social infrastructure (benches, piers, view points etc.) is almost non-existent and their social use and attractiveness are fairly negligible.

While engaging in other activities, the teenagers sometimes spontaneously brought up environmental issues in discussions; for example, in every school there was a group of girls who admired eco-supportive/friendly musicians or actors (stars) and, in discussions, the girls sometimes brought up ideas borrowed from them. The teenagers in Ferentari always complained about the rubbish overwhelming their district, while appreciating the cleanliness of other neighbourhoods they were visiting (as part of the projects or individually).

When discussing the future of Bucharest and the world, the youngsters in one of the Ferentari schools talked mostly about pollution; they imagined that it would either be reduced, for a better life, or would grow unbearably, overwhelming the entire social life worldwide. In this school, on the boundary between Ferentari and the city centre, ecology classes were recently taught and the pupils' discourse reflected the concepts learned. Further exploring the scenarios they imagined, I asked what they would do to improve the city's future situation but most of them did not imagine themselves as active urban actors; they rather imagined passive individual strategies to avoid and hide away from the pollution and other urban problems. This fact illustrates how a formal knowledge of

environmental issues and concepts is not sufficient to trigger a sense of empowerment in most young people.

The younger schoolchildren (12-15 years old) looked forward to holidays in the countryside and, besides performing the project tasks, often talked about their relatives' villages. When questioned further about their perception of rural life, many considered it to be calmer, easier, closer to nature and more desirable than urban life. This perception was not so frequent among the teenagers aged 15-18 or those that were wealthier. Besides the problems identified, they appreciated the advantages of urban life and preferred holidays at the seaside, at ski resorts or abroad, and less in the countryside.

These discussions facilitated the endeavour to follow, in parallel, 1) the different forms of attachment to natural places and 2) the different forms of knowledge of and sensitivity to environmental problems.

Environmental sensitivity and place attachment

On many occasions, pupils from the four schools representing the case studies confessed or manifested different kinds of sensitivity and levels of attachment to urban (and not only urban) natural environments.

When asked about their own meaningful places in the city, most teenagers referred to green corners such as specific places in parks, small gardens, or specific benches under trees in public squares. When asked about the most important places in their district, they referred to the parks. These perceptions reveal sensitivity towards the urban green environments. Moreover, when asked about their favourite places to "hang out", most of them singled out the parks. Unexpectedly, they did not prefer the closest, most accessible parks but those which fulfilled certain characteristics – such as diversity among the people (users), diversity in their functions, bicycle lanes or skating areas, good design, abundant vegetation and the presence of wildlife.

A more elaborate group-task for the young participants was to design a pedestrian route (promenade) around their district. In carrying out this task, most project groups designed walks that included green areas, even if this meant a detour. The green sites – small squares with flowers, small parks, lawns where they could sit down, certain large

trees with benches or places with fruit trees – were marked as key stops on all routes. We tested the promenades by walking together – teenagers, youth-workers, volunteers and guests. Along the routes, we discussed the social meanings of these green areas and the reasons why they played a key role.

During these and other thematic walks, the pupils' task was to compare and analyse different public spaces. They were asked to choose the ones they appreciated most and give their reasons. In general, public spaces with green elements were perceived as better and more pleasant than those without, especially those which featured infrastructure for stationary activities (benches, tables, touchable/accessible monuments, interesting views, drinking fountains etc.) and those which provided opportunities for diversified practices, ranging from resting and observing passers-by to playing and shopping. These results are similar to those obtained by Talen and Coffindaffer (1999) among children living in urban America – a fact that may lead us to conclude that young people generally prefer public spaces offering opportunities for stationary activities and a variety of uses, usually associated with green areas. This could be a topic for future research.

The action-research carried out a deeper investigation into the visual materials that the teenagers produced while taking part in thematic promenades. As a follow-up, the participants had to think up and propose ideas to improve some of the public spaces they had photographed or filmed – streets, small unused lots or waste ground, the space around their schools or the spaces between blocks of flats. Most of the ideas proposed were centred on introducing/expanding green elements and adding social infrastructure. To give some examples: one group imagined a garden illuminated with coloured lights at night, for late meetings, in an abandoned place between two blocks; another group suggested enlarging the sidewalks, planting alignment trees and drawing game boards on the pavement, under the protection of the trees, along one neighbourhood street; yet another group proposed a combination of benches and urban wildlife shelters in the parks, in order to bring people and nature closer together (Komunitas Association, 2009; 2010).

The task implementation and discussions revealed that teenagers' preferences and choices were triggered by a multitude of factors: 1) the utility of green areas offering

shade, sitting and playing facilities; but also by 2) the unique characteristics these may possess – peacefulness, sociability, pleasant design, memories and mystery; and, more for the older teenagers, 3) the principles they represented, such as romanticism, the victorious defiance of another social group (mainly, the elders or other teenagers) or the municipal authorities. Interpreting the action-research data in the key offered by the concept of “place attachment”, the teenagers’ preferences and choices can be understood as use-oriented attachments and place-oriented attachments and, for the older participants, concept-oriented attachments to the urban natural elements.

Acoustic ecology and environmental responsibility

Throughout the projects, the teenage participants spontaneously started discussions on urban sounds and noises, aside from the tasks they were performing. To examine this aspect, activities related to the exploration of urban sound were included in the project “Cultures from around the Block”. The perceptions and practices related to urban sounds are revealing for the current study, for two main reasons: first, they are matters of acoustic/sound ecology and are thus strongly connected with general environmental perceptions and behaviours; second, as they were not learnt in school, the teenagers had not acquired any formal concept of them – thus their perspectives on urban sounds may reflect their deeper perspectives on general environmental issues, beyond the discourses that were learnt and superficially reproduced.

Most teenagers were aware of stressful volumes of urban sounds (loud noises) and identified sources sound that was stressful to them: traffic jams, building sites and music from other sub-cultures or of other genres. In general, many sounds produced by “others” were perceived as stressful: the music of “others”, loud conversations in public and semi-public spaces, noises from neighbours, the voices of other generations or the sounds of unfamiliar places. But the teenage participants in the study did not acknowledge the fact that the sounds produced by their own daily practices had a stressful impact on the “others”. Moreover, their response to the acoustic urban environment is a passive individualistic one: they use headphones and mobile phone speakers to listen to their own music, surrounding themselves with an individualistic and isolating sound environment

while passing through urban public spaces and along urban routes. It is a similar response to the one imagined during the exercise involving the scenario of the “future of the city”; this similarity could indicate the consistency of the passive individualistic approach, for most teenagers, to environmental problems.

Indeed, the teenagers in Ferentari often complained about the rubbish in the district, blaming it on others, though at times they were careless about their own waste. They frequently complained about car pollution and the sacrifice of parks and green areas to the demands of the built environment, while at the same time they were hoping to own a car and a big house and to work in a tower block when they grew up. In addition, most of the participants complaining about the rubbish and pollution were not responsible consumers and did not understand the connection between their own actions and the environmental problems.

All the young people involved in the projects were hoping that the problems would “go somewhere else”. Thus, they did not perceive the environment as a connected whole involving their behaviours as well and did not understand the fact that there is no such “somewhere else”. The acoustic ecology of the participants’ daily practices highlights their reaction of withdrawing in the face of responsibility and their escapist strategy of blaming “the others”.

Forms of environmental empowerment

Despite the frequency of passive responses and avoided responsibilities, during the three years of action-research there were several situations in which the participants engaged in environmental behaviours, of different intensities and triggered by different stimuli.

During the “School of Creativity” project, all the pupils volunteered for environmental actions: some cleaned their school yard, others planted flowers and bushes in the school yard, and others participated as observers and photographers in a wider environmentalist demonstration. During “Our City – Our Decision” and “Closer to the Future” some pupils helped clean up two abandoned sites in order to transform them into green corners. During “Cultures from around the Block”, “Mobile Cinema” and “Closer

to the Future” the participants collected photographic, audio and video materials, to put the basis of several local environmental awareness campaigns. All the self-selected participants in the “Ekomunitas” activities created recycled art works, with the assistance of the association’s volunteers; many young teenagers (aged 12-14) wanted to participate, thus proving that recycled art was a popular activity.

Besides the involvement in environmental activities organized by the civic association, the youngsters also engaged in other initiatives, on an occasional basis. A few of the younger ones from Ferentari helped their parents and neighbours set up and maintain a green corner next to their social housing block, in a neighbourhood lacking any social or natural infrastructure. One class of pupils from the same school (the one on the edge of the city) started to collect waste separately in order to recycle it. On that occasion, two boys said that it was the first time they ever felt really useful but after a short while they gave up because the waste collection company would not agree on a contract.

When we review the teenagers’ environmental behaviours, a number of predominant threads can be identified: first, as mentioned in the previous sub-chapter, their individual reaction to environmental problems is responsibility avoidance; second, group activities and group initiatives empower them to take action, a form of empowerment that is enhanced when the activities involve additional stimuli such as entertainment, visits to new places or meetings with new (preferably a little older) young people; third, meaningful and familiar environments empower them to take action to improve, conserve, and maintain these same environments. In this case, it is the perceived possession of the environment, not of the environmental issue – corresponding to place-oriented or use-oriented, not concept-oriented place attachments – that triggers the environmental behaviour.

These facts also showed that environmental behaviours, for most of these teenagers, were still associated with extraordinary conditions and not with daily routines and principles. These predominant threads apply to most of the participants in the study, though there are exceptions. Analysing the exceptions could/would be the subject of a future research task.

5. Discussion

To sum up the data presented, the young people's environmental perceptions and behaviours unfold into a complex configuration: they formally acquire concepts of environmental knowledge in schools, with some informally acquiring additional concepts through the mass media and from their peers; they develop sensitivity and place attachment to natural environments and urban natural elements; they are aware of certain environmental problems on a local and global scale but they rarely perceive the connection between their own practices and these problems. In addition, they see "others" as being responsible for the problems; the connections between their formal environmental knowledge, their place attachment to specific natural environments, and their possession of/responsibility for environmental issues are rarely merged and converted into action; even so, environmental group empowerment manifests itself in extraordinary conditions, though it diminishes if the extraordinary stimuli are diluted. From a broader perspective, these contradictions suggest a gap between discourse and action and a gap between desired action and the empowerment to take action.

From this body of interconnected ideas, one thread could prove useful in the design of environmental education strategies. Most teenagers acquire environmental knowledge, experience environmental problems and develop different forms of sensitivity to natural elements. These are usually associated with different forms of place attachment, especially use-oriented and place-oriented attachments. This corpus of knowledge, feelings, experiences and bindings generates different forms of empowering and, finally, acting. Environmental education can only gain from turning all such forms of sensitivity, place attachment and empowerment into productive forces. In instrumental terms, a more efficient educational program should offer, in particular, practical environmental activities – taking advantage of the group empowerment and entertainment stimuli – while theoretical knowledge should be directly derived from the practical activities and, thus, create possession with regard to environmental issues. The activities should be implemented in places that are familiar and meaningful to the pupils – making place-oriented attachments productive – and should include features perceived as useful – making use-oriented place attachments productive. Occasional co-operation with

environmental associations (in Romania, they can be accessed in all counties and urban settlements) would add empowerment stimuli for the teenagers, as they would meet new young people and personalities.

The above recommendations are open to discussion, as the financial and human resource limitations in schools are a permanent issue. The paper's limitations are themselves open to discussion, improvement and new data from complementary papers, especially regarding the literature review and the opportunity sample. The present exploratory study also hopes to contribute to the enrichment of the three-dimensional theoretical model of environmental behaviour proposed by Hungerford and Volk (1990), with the concept of place attachment promoted by Shumaker and Taylor (1983), and to open this conceptual association to further debate/research.

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