

**ERD 2019**  
**Education, Reflection, Development, Seventh Edition**  
**EXPERIENCING AND BRINGING BACK THE RIVER IN THE**  
**URBAN FLOW: SOMEȘ DELIVERY**

Oana-Ramona Ilovan (a), Adriana Măgerușan (b), Cristian Nicolae Boțan (c), Maria Eliza Dulamă (d), Cosmina-Daniela Ursu (e), Paul Mutică (f)\*, Ioan Sebastian Jucu (g)

\*Corresponding author

- (a) Faculty of Geography, Babeș-Bolyai University, 5-7 Clinicilor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, ilvanoana@yahoo.com  
(b) Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, 34-36 Observatorului St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, adriana.magerusan@gmail.com  
(c) Faculty of Geography, Babeș-Bolyai University, 5-7 Clinicilor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, cristian.botan@ubbeluj.ro  
(d) Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, Babeș-Bolyai University, 7 Sindicatelor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, dulama@upcmail.ro  
(e) Faculty of Geography, Babeș-Bolyai University, 5-7 Clinicilor St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, ursucosmina@yahoo.com  
(f) Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, 34-36 Observatorului St., Cluj-Napoca, Romania, paulmutica@yahoo.com  
(g) Department of Geography, West University of Timișoara, 4V. Pârvan Blvd., Romania, ioan.jucu@e-uvvt.ro

***Abstract***

Not a recent, but an ever-growing trend in urban regeneration is that of reconsidering and re-establishing rivers in the city and within its image. This was the topic of a lecture and field trip concerning Someșul Mic River in Cluj-Napoca, while receiving information from and experiencing the river with the help of experts and voluntaries within the urban initiative Someș Delivery. University students and academics from Babeș-Bolyai University participated at these activities about the Someș Delivery project. Afterwards, we administered a questionnaire. 18 answers were collected. The clarity of some aspects was tested through a 5 point-Likert scale, to get the participants' feedback. When it comes to the strengths of the Someș Delivery project, the majority of the participants believed that community involvement and that of specialists was important. Furthermore, questions such as "What impact did the activity have on your professional development?" or "What is appropriate to do in order to improve community involvement?" engaged participants into a more elaborate discussion and thinking process. The weakness of the learning activity was the shortness of time, which means that they enjoyed this activity. Conclusions sum up the strengths and weaknesses of such a learning activity, while considering recommendations for future ones.

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**Keywords:** Riverside regeneration, project, community, learning practices.



## 1. Introduction

Geography, urbanism and architecture education are all studying space at different scales, but all of these fields are also about experiencing the place and about what Lefebvre (1991) calls lived space or what Soja (1996) calls third space. Learning about space is also about the lived, complicated and unrepeatable conditions of positioning in space (Goilav, 2016). In an interdisciplinary cooperation including participants from different fields, we assumed the premise that the students are equally participating in the production of an architectural culture (Vais, 2016) and urban space.

Someș River crosses the city of Cluj-Napoca, from west to east, for over 15 kilometres. But like in other cases of urban rivers, it is nowadays an infrastructure canal, a separation line that divides the city. Architects and urban planners have been studying for a long time how to turn the city's attention and face towards the river (Mitrea, 2011). In 2017, the Spanish based architecture office studio PRACTICA won the competition for Re-thinking Someș, an urban regeneration project to restore the river. Meanwhile, some bottom-up initiatives in the recent years encourage habitants to experience the riverbanks and participate in transforming urban space along the river.

Someș Delivery is just one of the local independent initiatives that aim at the appropriation of public space along the river. The main goal of Someș Delivery is to construct belonging (Bell, 1999) through socio-spatial practices (Samson, 2010) like community events and temporary architecture (Veer, Moga, & Mateiu, 2015). One way of achieving this is by involving students in a service-learning approach. For this, an open call competition for temporary interventions and happenings is launched every year. Another way of applying learning by doing practices is through the design & build workshops that involve students in conceiving and building temporary architecture, useful for the communities near the river, something that they can use in their everyday life rituals in the city (Tiwari, 2010) and act like urban catalyst (Oswalt, Overmeyer, & Misselwitz, 2013). In the first phase of the workshop, participants design the object and, in the second phase, they build it with their own hands, in a learning practice that reunites the mind and the craft work (Sennett, 2008).

In 2018, we included field trips as experiential learning practices so that participants get involved more in the discussion about urban regeneration, urban ecology, and sustainability. Like in the cartographies of urban drifting (dérive) of the Situationist International (Holmes, 2007; Kiib, 2011), the spatial practices worked as performative acts (Thrift, 2008), to stimulate participation and cooperation (Sennett, 2012). We started the field trip by walking in the city, mapping the urban space around the Someș and experiencing some of the temporary architecture built in Armătura Park.

The development of professional skills depends on students' learning styles (Chiș & Grec, 2017) and, therefore, promoting excellence and academic success should consider a diversity of educational strategies (Cuc, 2012, 2013a, 2019; Jucan, 2015; Jucan & Orian, 2013; Muste, 2014), as well as in the management of educational institutions (Manea, 2014, 2015; Precup & Chiș, 2017). Recent research has shown that there is a series of highly influential factors on academic success: learning through cooperation (Chiș, Magdaș, Dulamă, & Moldován, 2019), didactic communication (Cuc, 2013b; Muste, 2016), the media (Cuc, 2014), the environment where the learning process is taking place (Deac, Ilovan, Chiș, & Dulamă, 2019; Dulamă, Ilovan, Bagoly-Simó, & Magdaș, 2019), the Internet (Ilovan, Dulamă, Boțan, Magdaș, & Vana, 2016; Magdaș, Ilovan, Dulamă, & Ursu, 2018), etc. However, career counselling and professional practice prove

essential for labour market integration (Stan, 2016), and this field visit we proposed helped Geography university students to form their competences to explore, present and represent the urban space (Ursu, Dulamă, & Chiş, 2019), which is very close to instances of career counselling.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The Someş River is a natural resource that does not receive the needed attention, as far as urban regeneration is concerned.

## **3. Research Questions**

The research question of this study is the following: How could university students and the academia, in general, contribute to increasing the quality of life in their city, considering first raising their awareness about urban renewal initiatives?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The fellowship project, coordinated by the first author of this paper and the framework for the present case study discussed here, aimed at raising the awareness of the academic community regarding urban regeneration. Thus, this was the purpose of this study as well.

## **5. Research Methods**

### **5.1. Data collecting and processing**

In 2018, within the fellowship, four field trips were organised as experiential learning practices. One of this was at Someşul Mic River. During the visit we collected data through the method of direct observation. Afterwards, the participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire, available on Google Drive. We collected data about the participants (their age, occupation, residence) and their opinions regarding possible urban regeneration proposals for the Someş Delivery initiative.

### **5.2. Participants**

The study had a total of 20 respondents (participants). Of these, the majority were under the age of 30 (more than 85%), the other three age groups each having one respondent (representing 5% each). The respondents come in their entirety from university background, 75% of them being M.Sc. students (40%) or B.Sc. students (35%). The reminder are either Ph.D. students (10%) or members of the academia (lecturers or university professors – 5% each). The majority of the participants come from urban environments (65%), so they have some knowledge about urban development solutions or projects.

## **6. Findings**

The highest number of participants (23.40%) consider their main motivator in participating the opportunity to learn new ways of considering/regenerating a river flowing through a large city. This motivation can be understood since most of the participants are students in territorial planning. 21.27% of

their total number were motivated to participate in field applications by learning new ideas and the opportunity to find out about this landscape project. Being motivated by the chance to get information about the urban regeneration of a river directly from the persons involved in the process was mentioned by 19.15% of the respondents, whereas learning directly from the project was mentioned by 14.89% of them.

The appreciation of the clarity of the four aspects underlining the understanding of the case/situation/project by the 20 respondents returned positive results. On a 5-point Likert scale, 1 being totally unclear and 5 being crystal clear, for each indicator the average value was higher than 4 (Table 1). As such, the participants indicated almost perfect understanding of aspects regarding project presentation, the means in which the community is involved, the various organisations and institutions involved, the Someş River space configuration description and presentation, as well as the events that took place during the process. It is possible that a series of minute details regarding the four aspects of the project might still be unclear.

**Table 01.** Clarity of information presentation regarding the Someş Delivery project

Clarity of information presentation	Points				
	1	2	3	4	5
Presentation of the Someş Delivery project (concept, objectives/outcomes/results, financing)	-	-	1	5	14
Presentation of the means to involve the community (several people), organizations and institutions in the making of the project	-	1	1	6	12
Presentation and description of space configuration near the Someş River during the Someş Delivery project	-	-	2	4	14
Presentation of events organised as part of the Someş Delivery project	-	-	1	3	16

The participants also allotted 1-5 points in their consideration of the geographic value of several aspects regarding the integration of the Someş River in Cluj-Napoca urban life (urban regeneration, layout of the riverbed and meadow, etc.). It seems the importance of integrating the river in Cluj-Napoca urban life is clear to the 20 respondents. They understand the fact that, through various layouts, the Someş River and its tributary, the Nadăș, can contribute to an increase in urban life quality. Of the mentioned indicators, most impact seems to have the active implication of the community in activities nearby the Someş, the design of several observation spots along the river or several access points to the riverbed itself (Table 2). The importance of other designs near the river, such as children playgrounds or events (both for children and adults), was perceived as less important, and probably in vision of the general safety of those involved.

**Table 02.** The perception of relevant aspects in integrating the Someş in Cluj-Napoca city life

Aspects in integrating the Someş in Cluj-Napoca city life	Points				
	1	2	3	4	5
Setting up observation spots (benches, observation points/sentry towers) along the river	-	-	1	3	16
Setting up access points to the river bed itself	-	-	3	4	13
Setting up of several children playgrounds near the river	1	2	5	3	9
Setting up of several event points (for both adults and children)	-	1	1	6	12
Setting up of several crossing points over the river tributary – the Nadăș River	-	1	4	6	9
Setting up of several pontoons and the ferry	-	-	3	5	12
Collecting garbage from the river bed and meadow, all across the city	-	0	2	3	15

Involving the community in riverside activities (flea markets, collecting garbage, festivals, picnics, contests, debates, etc.)	-	-	-	5	15
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The 20 respondents gave multiple answers in identifying the Someș Delivery project strengths (Table 3). 90% of them pleaded for the motivation and implication of the community in activities that harness the urban presence of the river as a main project strongpoint. In contrast, least important for only 45% of the participants, seems to be involving and motivating companies and institutions in activities regarding the river potential. The other strongpoints were allotted an average scoring between these two extremes.

The classification of the main challenges the Someș Delivery project was facing indicate the fact that the respondents are somewhat aware of the general issues that any urban development project must overcome in order to succeed (Table 4). From most to less stringent, these challenges are: few financial resources (for project implementation), the different and conflicting view of “Apele Române” National Water Management Agency that are charged with administrating areas immediately surrounding water bodies, the poor involvement of Cluj community, specific and strict legislation concerning river development, poor involvement of the residents, the small number of project volunteers and the small number of specialists with permanent preoccupations for the project.

**Table 03.** Someș Delivery project strongpoints

Someș Delivery project strongpoints	Weight (%)
Motivating/convincing and involving the community in activities that harness the presence of the Someș	90
Involving several specialists from different fields regarding urban landscape and regeneration	75
The design of several spaces (bridge, observation decks, steps, benches, etc.) for activities that harness the value of the river presence	65
Setting up events that use relatively little expenses	50
Motivating/convincing and involving the City Hall in activities that harness the presence of the Someș	50
Motivating/convincing and involving several organisations, institutions and companies in activities that harness the presence of the Someș	45

**Table 04.** The main challenges Someș Delivery project was facing, according to the participants

The relevance of challenges Someș Delivery Project was faced with	Points				
	1	2	3	4	5
The conflicting view of “Apele Române” National Water Management Agency that are charged with administrating areas immediately surrounding the river	1	-	1	7	11
Specific and strict legislation concerning river development	-	1	2	9	8
Scarce financial resources	1	1	1	4	13
Poor involvement of Cluj community at large	1	-	4	6	9
Poor involvement of nearby residents	-	1	5	8	6
The small number of specialists with permanent preoccupations for the project	-	1	8	6	5
The small number of volunteers	2	2	5	5	6

The respondents perceived avenues for their personal professional development from the perspective of learning directly from the project in diverse and multiple ways (Table 5). The most important aspect for

their personal professional development according to them is the presentation of a certified specialist involved in the project of their design for places, followed by direct and indirect observation (through photographs) of these specially designed installations, and by a presentation of further future developments along the Someș. The others are considered as less important for personal development than the above-mentioned three.

The short time allotted for the project presentation was considered the main weakness of Someș Delivery according to the participants (50%), when asked what made the learning process less than optimal. A longer time span would have allowed for a deeper understanding of the issues connected to the project and of the elements resulting in its aftermath. Also, the fact that they were mostly listening instead of contributing with their own ideas, questions and opinions to the project was considered a weak point by 40% of the respondents. 30% of answers saw the lack of interactivity as a drawback, while 25% of them considered not knowing the other participants to the activity as a shortcoming.

**Table 05.** The relevance of certain aspects connected to the Someș Delivery project to personal professional development

The relevance of certain aspects to personal professional development	Points				
	1	2	3	4	5
Obtaining information (vision/perspectives, objectives, targets, activities/events, etc.) about Someș Delivery from a specialist involved in the project	1	-	1	6	12
The presentation by a person involved in the making of Someș Delivery of certain places designed for the occasion	1	-	-	5	14
Direct and indirect observation (through photographs) of specially designed places/installations during the Someș Delivery project	-	-	3	4	13
The presentation by a person involved in the making of Someș Delivery of certain problems they faced during implementation	1	-	-	7	12
The presentation by a specialist involved in the making of Someș Delivery of future developments along the Someș, planned for the years to come	1	-	-	6	13
Direct analysis of the Someș in order to identify possible problems	-	1	1	6	12
The possibility to pose questions to persons directly involved in urban regeneration processes near the Someș river	1	-	-	7	12
Approaching the problem of space capitalisation from an interdisciplinary perspective by the community of Cluj as a whole	-	-	-	8	12
Information novelty	-	-	2	6	12
Information value	-	-	3	5	12

Starting from identified and analysed problems regarding Someș Delivery, the participants were then asked to make further proposals for better involving the residents near the river in the urban regeneration process. They considered that “resident interests regarding the river potential should be better understood and there should be special places designed to satisfy those interests/needs (not just places designed for one activity, such as river gazing, but for more flexible activities to enhance a more agreeable participation by all)”. Some respondents believe a better engagement of the local population might be achieved by “designing more amenities for leisure activities”, “organising events”, and “setting up a series of social interactions”. Others feel that “better publicity for the project, including through a PowerPoint presentation”, might be a good solution, and that “a better information of the public and a means of shifting

some responsibility on the population through activities involving the residents themselves through acts of volunteering” might also help. In conclusion, if the inhabitants were to be better informed through the media, were to be presented with a higher variety of events or if they were to have some financial incentives, they would surely participate in greater numbers. While the respondents’ proposals are different in nature, they all converge on the idea that a better involvement of the local populace can be achieved through a more efficient means of information, creating responsibility and direct involvement in the decision-making process.

Participants were asked to give their opinion regarding the steps needed to hasten the project proposed by the Spanish architecture company, PRACTICA, a redesign of the spaces along the Someșul Mic. The respondents stated that the involvement of Cluj-Napoca City Hall is a complex matter. They believe that the local authorities should intensify their efforts and contacts with the representatives of the Spanish company, provide financial aid and, most of all, modify local legislation if needed, provide logistical support, promote the project, issue building permits faster (“expedite the issue of necessary permits”), etc. The proposals made by respondents cover a wide range of phenomena and actions (legislative, financial, lobbying) needed to implement such a project to redesign and reintegrate the Someș in the daily life of the city.

Participants were asked to imagine the river in the future. The ability to visualize the future quality and importance of the river implies different ideas and wishes. Some respondents imagine it as an attractive place, “navigable”, “clean”, “beautiful”, “a place where one can relax”, “can admire nature”, or “forget about the city”; “an area of relaxation and escape from the urban”, “a river that unites Cluj instead of dividing it”, “a spectacular landscape of trees, graffiti, and sculptures”. A respondent proposes a design model: “design should resemble the one along Vistula River, in Krakow, with restaurant boats and green areas”. For this space to correspond to their needs and wishes, participants suggest: “the extension of the promenade”, “green area with pier”, “with steps and tracks”, “with boats across the water”, “with establishments where one can enjoy a beverage”, “observation decks (but with durable materials, not untreated fir)”, and small bridges.

However, other respondents view it as a more polluted, dirtier, and more crowded place. Mindful of the traffic problems, one respondent suggested sacrificing the trees on both river banks to widen the street or building a street above the water. There are still answers that paint the view of this urban water course as something positive, which could become an alternative for the existing issues, and to enhance the relaxation facilities for the people of Cluj-Napoca as well as for tourists.

As people are generally attracted to a place where there are certain organised activities, the participants were asked to share their views on what type of activities they would organize or would like to see organised near or on the river. They proposed a wide array of activities: recreation and relaxation (walks or bicycle rides, boat rides, canoeing, etc.), cultural-artistic (concerts, films, live shows, sculpture and painting camps, etc.), sports (jogging, fishing, water sports, zip lines, etc.), scientific (thematic sessions, field research, research parks, awareness raising on the importance of the Someșul Mic for people’s lives, etc.), services (food establishment; “barbecues”; “weekly fairs (involving artists)”, competitions (bicycles), festivals (“beer festivals”), charitable events, and group meals. Many people expressed their preference for

permanent activities, for places that one can always find there, for large as well as small-scale activities (“a small live concert”).

Given enough financial resources and in the context of permissive legislations, the participants, knowledgeable of territorial planning and Geography, were asked to make proposals for attractive space design in the proximity of the Someș. One participant proposed “a design which will not change its general image, thus safeguarding its recreation area characteristic”, without any economic activities, “integrated in the urban circuit, but with basic facilities (viewing platforms, places for rest, passageways)”.

The participants proposed diverse amenities (pool tables, chess tables, hammocks, urban furniture, fitness infrastructure, table tennis, pontoons, docks for lightweight boats, sand banks, sensors for aquatic fauna monitoring, waste filters), a redesign for walking, picnic, beaches (like in Grigorescu neighbourhood), playgrounds, small sized temporary food and beverage establishments, sport fields (for tennis or basketball, mini-tracks for running), places for different activities (parties, fairs, sales, concerts, competitions, food fairs, events, etc.).

They also proposed more green areas, a spectacular redesign with trees and bushes, art (in Dmitry Sharapov’s style) close to the water, creating places for observation, relaxation, meditation, with style “terraces”/balconies where one can get a drink, fun but safe places. From a geographer’s point of view, a participant suggested widening the river bed and creating wet areas.

Using an open-ended question, the participants were asked to imagine the best scenario for the urban regeneration of both river banks. Two participants viewed Someș Delivery project as the best scenario, four respondents advocated for recreation/relaxation scenarios. Other participants endorsed scenarios that included: sports (one view), festivals (one), walking (one), and ecologisation (one). One person considers either building a highway above the river or redesigning it for navigation, through a system of floodgates, despite the risk of disturbing the underground water. One participant prefers an “integrated design, with different types /categories/forms/styles, in accordance to what the people living there want (pontoons, bridges, green areas, sheds, flower beds, adventure parks, etc.). Another one chose a scenario which would create more “wild areas, where the river can reclaim its natural beauty”, including the conservation of Armătura Park. Four participants refused to answer or stated “I do not know”.

As the banks and the river bed are riddled with polluting waste, we also asked the participants to come up with solutions to this problem. Some solutions for the development of a fair, responsible behaviour, towards the Someșul Mic are at level 1 of environmental education and awareness raising (Tbilisi Declaration, 1977, as cited in Dulamă, 2010), and others at level 5, such as participation. Respondents proposed preventive educational measures (awareness campaigns), surveillance, redesigns (filters/sieves for waste; more trash bins). Other proposed measures of containing pollution (cleaning the banks of tributary rivers; all communities in the hydrographic basin of the Someșul Mic must learn not to discard waste at random; volunteer work for students, and others). There is also the implementation of a reward system (“plastic in exchange for money/vouchers” in Cluj-Napoca and the surrounding communities), while some prefer coercive measures (i.e. fines).

We were also interested in finding out the manner in which participants would like to apply what they had learned during the visit. 60% would go to other similar visits or events, which demonstrates the perception of the activity’s efficiency. 45% of participants would apply what they had learned by



cooperating in projects with the other respondents, while 35% by publishing with the other participants. A third of the participants would use the information by maintaining a relationship with the Someș Delivery initiative, as well as through volunteering for the activities proposed by Someș Delivery.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper dealt with the ever-growing trend in urban regeneration of rivers and waterfronts related to the urban image as a key action in cities' renewal. The study considered the Someșul Mic River in Cluj-Napoca, approached in the interchangeable processes of urban regeneration and qualitative learning through students' direct involvement. The key issue addressed was that of re-establishing rivers and urban waterfronts within the city image.

The findings of the study unveiled both the role of the rivers' re-consideration in the ongoing urban renewal processes and the issue of qualitative learning through students' direct and practical involvement in this major urban question.

Concerning the first issue, the main relevance of the urban regeneration through the waterfront exploitation stands on both the community and the specialist involvement since the question of rivers in urban areas have to be more present on the agenda of local urban renewal and development. In this regard, Someșul Mic River in Cluj-Napoca could provide multiple opportunities for further programmes in remaking both the urban image and the landscape of the city.

Moving forward to the second topic of learning activities using urban regeneration as a study platform for students, the findings illustrated particular strengths and weaknesses. While the latter referred often to the time resources insufficiency, the first attributes highlighted that this type of learning is agreed upon and enjoyed by the participants (students in their majority), forming relevant competences in approaching the issues of urban regeneration. The students learned information about Someș Delivery, they observed the solutions in the field, and they received answers for their uncertainties. They understood that the city life benefits not only from people's observation of the river, but especially from the activities that bring people together and near the river, in a planned or unplanned manner. Their imagination was challenged when they had to imagine the Someș in the future.

Our project succeeded in raising awareness about the regeneration of the Someș River, it provided opportunities to learn about a local initiative and the way it tries to connect to the city, but also challenged participants' sense of observation and imagination. Since this intersection of students' learning and the questions of urban regeneration appears to be in the spotlight of qualitative instruction, this paper claims both for further debates and reflections, opening new academic avenues for future research in the context of urban regeneration and the students' qualitative learning through direct research.

## **Acknowledgments**

The authors gratefully acknowledge the participants' contribution to our activities (in the lecture room and in the field) and to the survey. We would also like to gratefully acknowledge our host's significant contribution (time and effort) to the success of the field trip, the representative of Someș Delivery: architect Adriana Măgerușan, Ph.D.

The research for this article was supported by a STAR-UBB Institute Fellowship (The Institute of Advanced Studies in Science and Technology, belonging to Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania), won by Associate Professor Oana-Ramona Ilovan, Ph.D., during the 2018-2019 academic year (for the October-November 2018 period): *Exceelență didactică pentru sustenabilitatea comunității academice și responsabilizare civică* [Didactic Excellence for a Sustainable Academic Community and Its Civic Empowerment] (Ilovan, 2018).

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