

Landscape in Focus: The Czech Perspective on Sustainable Landscape Development

Zuzana Štemberová*, Magdalena Smetanová, Eva Jeníková

Czech Technical University in Prague, Faculty of Architecture, Czech Republic

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This paper presents the research background, methodology, case study examples, and final recommendations from five case studies conducted in the Czech Republic as part of the international project Landscape in Focus. This two-year project is implemented within the European educational program Erasmus+. Its main objective is to support and raise awareness among municipal representatives and citizens of small and medium-sized municipalities in planning, decision-making, and addressing landscape-related challenges. The project facilitates interactions between experts and local representatives, providing information, tools, and methodologies through a web platform, a brochure, and professional conferences. The project is built on case studies that showcase proven or innovative approaches to landscape management in four European countries: the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, and Slovakia. The paper focuses on five case studies from the Czech Republic, selected for their strong conceptual and sustainable planning. These cases consider land use needs, environmental sustainability, climate change adaptation, and the preservation of local identity, cultural and historical values, as well as high-quality public spaces and architecture.

Keywords: Landscape architecture, Rural municipalities, Sustainable development, Climate change adaptation, Erasmus+ project

1 Introduction

The issue of comprehensive planning, care and development of the landscape focused on the problems of small and medium-sized municipalities is often neglected, not only in the general context, but also in research, and therefore also in the professional literature. In the Czech Republic, approximately 90% of the municipalities (5,616) are of the so-called 'rural type', i.e. those with up to 2,000 inhabitants. About 26.2% of the population of the Czech Republic (2 678 362 inh.) live in 'rural' municipalities. The cadastral area of these municipalities is about 73.6% of the area of the country (5 808,125 ha). (Obecní noviny, 2006, Český statistický úřad (ČSÚ), 2024). Representatives of state administration and local governments in small and medium-sized municipalities lack sufficient professional support and specific information – sufficient attention is paid to public spaces in municipalities, but the broader relationship

between the natural environment, rural landscape and built-up areas is still insufficiently researched and published. This results in non-comprehensive planning, limited decision-making in the territory, and unsatisfactory involvement of citizens and stakeholders. The Landscape in Focus project, aimed at sharing experiences in the European area, responds to these problems.

The preparation of the project included a search of available literature in the Czech environment. The inspiration and main starting point of the project is the document 'Council of Europe Landscape Convention' with the concept of landscape defined as 'the space in which people live, as an expression of the diversity of their common cultural and natural heritage and the basis of their identity' (Council of Europe, 2000). The project is generally based on additional strategic documents, with the fundamental one being the Green Infrastructure

***Corresponding Author:** Zuzana Štemberová, Czech Technical University in Prague, Faculty of Architecture, Thákurova 9, 166 34 Praha 6 – Dejvice, Czech Republic, phone: +420 603185858
e-mail: Zuzana.stemberova@fa.cvut.cz

Strategy (Strategie EU pro zelenou infrastrukturu, which provides a framework for planning interconnected natural and urban elements in the landscape (European Commission, 2013)). Regarding rural development, with an emphasis on sustainability, climate change adaptation, and quality of life in small settlements, an essential document is the The Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas 2040 (Dlouhodobá vize pro venkovské oblasti EU Rural Vision 2024) (European Commission, 2021). Additionally, the European Network for Rural Development (Evropská síť venkovského rozvoje), offers methodological resources for rural planning, including participatory decision-making models (European Network for Rural Development, n.d.).

For the Czech Republic, the initial theme of the project was to find an approach to the rural landscape, for example, to specify a suitable definition of the countryside. One of them is mentioned in a special issue of the magazine *Zlatý řez*: 'The countryside differs from the city rather in that it exhibits a low level of urbanisation. Quantitative definitions of the countryside, used for administrative purposes, say this clearly: the countryside is determined by both the size of the municipality expressed in terms of population and population density. As for the size of a settlement, the upper limit is usually between 2,000 and 3,000 inhabitants. Even small towns can easily fit into the concept of "countryside". However, qualitative characteristics, the use of the landscape, and the inhabitants' way of life are also important. The countryside far from large cities has a different character, and the suburban countryside, which is often difficult to distinguish from suburbia... What are the specifics of architectural work in the countryside?' (Zlatý řez, 2017). The periodical emphasises the cultural and aesthetic value of the rural landscape and the need for its protection in several articles.

Along similar lines, i.e. an architectural and urban approach focused on rural settlements, the proceedings of the Countryside and Architecture conference from the Faculty of Architecture of the Czech Technical University in Prague (Rýpar et al., 2017) is put forth. Kateřina Hroncová states here: 'Although the starting points and basic principles of working with the public space of a city and a village may be similar, planning a village and its development, including high-quality public spaces, requires an even more specific approach that applies a close relationship to the landscape and to the real needs and activities of the village residents. At present, the current needs and activities of rural residents are not precisely known, just as the broader landscape context is not sufficiently included in rural planning.' The contribution is then primarily focused on the public spaces of the municipality, and the overlap

into the landscape is addressed only from the perspective of visual impact. Publications such as *Kuchařka kultivace českých měst (The Cultivation Cookbook of Czech Cities)* (Fullerová, 2023), *Plánování veřejných prostranství malých obcí (Planning Public Spaces of Small Municipalities)* (Hainc et al., 2021), or *Možnosti vesnice: portréty architektonické proměny českého venkova (Village Possibilities: Portraits of Architectural Transformations of the Czech Countryside)* (Hečková, 2021) provide guidelines for improving public spaces. Others, such as *Veřejná prostranství aneb jak udělat veřejný prostor dobře (Public Spaces or How to Do Public Spaces Well)* (Šimková et al., 2019), created as part of the implementation of the Policy of Architecture and Building Culture of the Czech Republic (Ministry of Regional Development of the Czech Republic (Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj České republiky, 2023) show practical approaches and guidelines for their creation. Unfortunately, the aforementioned works lack a comprehensive view connecting the topic of public spaces in small and medium-sized municipalities with the broader ecological and cultural context of the landscape.

Conceptual landscape planning includes both settlements and the open countryside. Such a conceptual approach should be the essence of creating a green infrastructure system. Several documents are devoted to the implementation of green infrastructure in the Czech environment, general principles and case studies are offered, for example, by the output of the Interreg Project (*Příručka zelené infrastruktury [Green Infrastructure Handbook]*, 2019). A more recent example is the methodology *Vymezování zelené infrastruktury v územně plánovací dokumentaci, zejména v územním plánu, jako nástroj posilování ekosystémových služeb v území (Defining green infrastructure in spatial planning documentation, especially in the spatial plan, as a tool for strengthening ecosystem services in the area)* (Kučera et al., 2023), which, however, due to its professional complexity and scope, has limited use in practice by small and medium-sized municipalities. However, in the Czech environment, green infrastructure is often perceived only as an area structure, without additional layers and process continuity, and therefore without the necessary coherence. In the details of settlements, blue-green infrastructure is addressed in more detail, so far mostly explicitly defining the urban environment in the title – for example, *Voda ve městě: metodika pro hospodaření s dešťovou vodou ve vazbě na zelenou infrastrukturu (Water in the city: a methodology for rainwater management in relation to green infrastructure)* (Sýkorová et al., 2021) or *Modrozelená města: příklady adaptačních opatření v ČR a jejich ekonomické hodnocení (Blue-green cities: examples of adaptation measures in the Czech Republic*

and their economic evaluation) (Macháč & Hekrlé, 2023, also e.g. Novotná et al., 2015, Štemberová et al., 2024). The aforementioned publications provide a number of examples, procedures and tools; however, they take into account the specifics of rural settlements and their relationship to the open landscape to a lesser extent.

An important topic, key for the Landscape in Focus project, is the adaptation of the landscape to climate change. It is generally defined in national documents and is part of the strategies of larger cities (e.g. Prague, Liberec). However, it is only exceptionally developed for small and medium-sized municipalities, with one of the rare examples being the project Climate change adaptation strategy for the territory of MAS Podlipansko o.p.s. (Salzmann et al., 2023).

Rural settlements from a landscape perspective are also addressed in specialised professional materials, for example, recommendations for vegetation composition are provided in *Metodika vhodných druhů dřevin a bylin pro venkovská sídla (A methodology of suitable species of trees and herbaceous plants for rural settlements)* (Baroš et al., 2014).

The project is based on the above-mentioned sources and its aim is not only to increase the expertise and competence of representatives of state and local government but also to stimulate interest in the landscape among the general public. The mutual support of the participating countries is important, as it allows a wider methodological scope and sharing of the project results.

2 Material and Methods

2.1 Working Progress

The Landscape in Focus project aims at providing small and medium-sized municipalities with tools to adopt a conceptual approach to planning and strategic landscape development regarding climate change. The outputs of the work include case studies from the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany and Slovakia and their generalisation for the needs of representatives of the state administration, municipalities, representatives of the public and stakeholders in the territory.

Work on the project started with the creation of a team of experts in the field of landscape architecture from organisations providing administrative and organisational background. An important step was the selection of suitable partners from other European countries where there are similar conditions and problems (Slovakia) or have different approaches to solving this issue (Germany, Finland). The teams included

representatives of national professional institutions and the academic sector in the field of landscape architecture. An international perspective is important for ensuring a diversity of approaches and tools that can be used in the Czech context.

The team worked on defining the problems and proposing solutions by working together in shared workshops. The meetings discussed the key starting points of the project and, through joint discussions, the areas on which the project would focus were specified. The main themes that are relevant to all participating countries include, for example, environmental challenges, the public space, permeability, local identity, community activation, sustainable planning and design, and others. Keywords that specify the focus of the project include, for example, restoration of nature, sustainable food production, flood and drought protection, care for cultural heritage, or support for sustainable tourism.

The output of the project is a set of examples of good practice, which contains tools, practical procedures and concrete solutions that link the above-mentioned topics. The approach in individual areas is described in a brochure and is published together with the case studies on the website <https://lif-t.eu>, in individual language versions. In each participating country, the case studies were selected according to similar criteria and taking into account local needs – in the Czech Republic, the selection was focused primarily on the overall approach of municipalities to the renewal and development of the territory.

2.2 Methodology

Within the framework of methodology, emphasis was placed on research of the professional literature, which provided a theoretical framework for the selection of suitable approaches and solutions. The basis of the work was then the definition of the current state, the specification of problems in individual countries, and the selection of criteria and topics for case studies.

The actual selection of case studies was another important part of the project. Selections were made based on reaching out to experts, interest groups and the general public. The topic and potential case studies were discussed with our associate partners and other organisations that bring small and medium-sized municipalities together, e.g. the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic (Svaz měst a obcí České republiky), the National Network of Local Action Groups of the Czech Republic (LAG NN) (Národní síť místních akčních skupin ČR, z.s.), the Association of Local Governments of the Czech Republic (Sdružení místních samospráv ČR), the Association for Rural Renewal



Figure 1 Map: Location of the municipalities selected as case studies within the Czech Republic

of the Czech Republic (Spolek pro obnovu venkova ČR), the Partnership Foundation (Nadace Partnerství), the Via Foundation (Nadace Via), the Czech Chamber of Architects (Česká komora architektů) and other professionals from Landscape Architecture, Architecture and Urbanism.

The next step was the creation of a database of potential municipalities, the determination of selection criteria according to the requirements of the project, followed by a survey of individual municipalities, which made it possible to obtain authentic data on the current state of the landscape and public space. Interviews with project participants, local residents,

experts and representatives of the municipalities were also included, which provided valuable information on the experience and challenges in the given settlement. The database contains 45 potentially suitable municipalities, a survey of the site was carried out in 22 municipalities. Five municipalities were selected for the processing of case studies: Kostelní Lhota, Mšeno, Nadějkov, Židlochovice and Neratov in the Orlické Mountains (Fig. 1)

The actual structure of the case study includes several key parts: a main motto, which expresses the basic principle of the project, an annotation, providing a brief overview of the given municipality and its specific challenges, a detailed

description of the specific project and its outputs, and, last but not least, references, which refer to the projects and strategies of the municipalities. The format of the case studies was chosen as brief and informative while answering the main questions for the needs of the educated public. The case studies have been adapted in a format suitable for web presentation, with structured text, keywords and topics, and enabling searches (Table 1).

The project was presented at professional conferences in all participating countries during its implementation. In the Czech Republic, it was presented at the professional conference on Architecture Policies at FA CTU (Faculty of Architecture, Czech Technical University in Prague, 2024) and at the Conference on Landscape Day of the Council of Europe ČAKA/ SZKT Czech Association of Landscape Architects/ Czech Landscape and Garden Society, 2024), thus becoming part of the professional debate and supporting the exchange of experience between experts and local governments. The project is planned to be completed in 2026, when the final outputs of the entire international project will be presented at the final professional conference.

3 Results and Discussion

A comparison of the case studies shows the different approaches and solutions chosen by the individual municipalities depending on specific conditions, such as the size of the settlement, historical and cultural context, social environment, and environmental challenges (Table 2). The municipality of Kostelní Lhota focuses on the regeneration of its damaged landscape and the sensitive restoration of cultural heritage, while Mšeno focuses on the revitalisation of the urban

Table 1 Selection criteria used for the purpose of selecting case studies

Selection criteria used for the selection of case studies	
1	– sustainability long-term viability of solutions
2	– conceptual approach strategic landscape planning
3	– community Involvement local inhabitants and stakeholders engagement.
4	– architectural quality aesthetic and functional rural design
5	– health and Well-being enhancing residents' quality of life

Table 2 Overview of the area and population of the municipalities selected as case studies

Overview of the area and population of the municipalities selected as case studies					
	municipality	municipality area (km ²)	number of inhabitants	population density (people.km ⁻²)	note
1	Mšeno	26.74	1403	52.4	
2	Židlochovice	5.93	3673	619	Since 2003, Židlochovice has been a municipality with extended competence, its administrative district comprises a total of 24 municipalities
3	Nadějkov	24.08	717	29.8	
4	Kostelní Lhota	8.66	921	106.4	
5	Neratov (Bartošovice v Orlických horách)	8.1	65	8	Neratov is one of the 6 cadastral areas of the municipality Bartošovice v Orlických horách, which has an area of 35.61 km ² and population of 229 people

space and support for local tourism. Nadějkov, on the other hand, relies on active community cooperation and ecological initiatives, such as the restoration of its parish garden. Židlochovice emphasises the architectural quality of buildings and public spaces, conscious planning of settlement development, ecological sustainability, and flood protection. Neratov, on the other hand, represents an example of the restoration of a defunct village, where the emphasis is on the integration of social and ecological aspects into community development. Although the individual municipalities differ in specific goals and methods, they all share a common principle – the active involvement of local residents and the long-term sustainability of the projects.

Case study 1: Kostelní Lhota – Suchan (ab)normal Elbe village

Area: 8.66 km²

Population: 921 inhabitants

Kostelní Lhota is located in the Elbe Plain, where the fertile landscape has been significantly affected by human activity, including flow regulation and drainage. The region suffers from a lack of landscape elements and erosion, which is a result of industrial agriculture. The local landscape is

also affected by the strain of the D11 motorway and the consequences of extensive floods in 2013 and drought in 2015–2020. Kostelní Lhota emphasises the sustainability and restoration of the landscape, while preparing strategic documents in cooperation with experts. The village regularly plants greenery, revitalises watercourses and wetlands, and strives to create a green belt around the built-up area to screen off the motorway.

The municipality is actively working on the restoration of its public

space and the sensitive restoration of architectural and cultural values, including the restoration of the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, which is a key cultural monument (Fig. 2) Kostelní Lhota also focuses on the development of community life and the involvement of local residents in the planning and implementation of these projects. Among the most important events are traditional social events that promote community belonging. Thanks to these activities, the municipality is growing and



Figure 2 Kostelní Lhota: The Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, a significant cultural monument of the village, which has been sensitively restored in recent years
Source: Archive of the municipality Kostelní Lhota

attracting new residents. The complex ownership relationships and financial constraints is a major problem that slow down some revitalisation projects. Nevertheless, the municipality has managed to win a number of awards, including the Green Ribbon in the Village of the Year competition and the European Village Renewal Award.

The emphasis on strategic planning, community collaboration, and sustainability makes Kostelní Lhota an example of a municipality that successfully responds to the challenges of landscape transformation and supports the local environment and community.

Case study 2: Mšeno – A quality life in a small town

Area: 26.7 km²

Population: 1,403 inhabitants

Mšeno, a small town in the Central Bohemian Region, has long strived to improve its public space and develop the local community. The town, which is located in an area with a historic centre, faced challenges such as a dysfunctional public space and traffic congestion. In response to the planned renovation of the main road in the centre, the town took the initiative and decided to renovate the square and other public spaces at its own expense (Fig. 3). This step led to the revitalisation of the town centre and supported the development of local tourism.

The town is also undergoing sensitive renovations of historic buildings, including an Art Deco public baths and other public buildings. Other important projects

are the restoration of an alley, the renovation of a school and the provision of connections to surrounding municipalities. Mšeno has also restored train connections for weekend visitors, which facilitates transport in the area. The town has faced challenges such as project funding, but thanks to the use of grant titles and its own funds, the vision of development has been fulfilled. A strong concept and emphasis on preserving the local historical character have proven an important success factor.

Another important contribution is the activation of local residents, who are more involved in local events, which has led to positive changes. Mšeno has proved to be an example of a community that has managed to build a welcoming and functional public space thanks to a conceptual approach, sensitive renewal and establishment of local residents' participation.

Case study 3: Nadějkov – A small village, a strong community and the landscape of the Jistebnická vrchovina highlands

Area: 24.08 km²

Population: 717 inhabitants

The village of Nadějkov in the South Bohemian Region is an example of an active community focused on landscape restoration and improving public space.

The revitalisation of the parish garden (Fig. 4) at the Church of the Holy Trinity, which served mainly as a parking lot and a thoroughfare for a second-class road until 2011, is considered the main project.



Figure 3 Mšeno: The renovated central square of the small town with a fountain
Source: Archive of the municipality Mšeno



Figure 4 Nadějkov: The parish garden (Farská zahrada) next to the central Church of the Holy Trinity in the village is the result of collective efforts of the local community
Source: Beautification Association for Nadějkov and its Surroundings (Okrašlovací spolek pro Nadějkov a okolí)

The renovation of the garden, carried out under the leadership of the Ornamental Association for Nadějkov and Its Surroundings, brought a place for meetings and community events to the centre of the village. The project included aesthetic and functional modifications with the aim of harmoniously fitting into the rural landscape. Local residents were actively involved not only in the planning but also in the implementation of the project, making it part of wider community life. Other key activities are the restoration of historical paths, planting fruit trees, building pools and documenting sacred monuments in the landscape. The Zachovalý kraj association also organises meetings with experts and has created an online database of historical monuments and restored paths. Promoting tourism and strengthening the local identity have been important achievements.

The continuity of projects and support for conceptual planning, especially in the revitalisation of the central square, remains the challenge for the municipality.

Case study 4: Židlochovice – Against drought and floods, for community and biodiversity

Area: 5.93 km²

Population: 3,673 inhabitants

Židlochovice, a small town near Brno, has long focused on sustainable development and ecological solutions as well as the development of a high-quality public space and architecture.

The creation of a 13 ha flood park along the Svratka River, which not only protects against floods but also improves biodiversity and provides space for recreation (Fig. 5), has been a significant step. This park, with a built-in blind branch and pool, serves to retain water, protect birds and other animals and also to stabilise the groundwater level. The town is also focusing on revitalising the landscape, including the Líchy Forest Park with a wetland, orchards, and meadows that support the ecological balance. In addition to environmental projects, Židlochovice is also striving to improve its public space, including a new



Figure 5 Židlochovice: Aerial view of the newly established floodplain park along the Svatka River
Source: Archive of the municipality Židlochovice

In 1992, the Neratov Association was founded, which focused on restoring the village and creating a vibrant and sustainable community.

The association, led by parish priest Josef Suchár and together with the Němec and Malík families, decided to restore the church, which was then reconstructed with a new glass roof, and to build sheltered workplaces and housing for people with disabilities (Fig. 6). Neratov gradually became a centre of community and spiritual life, where today more than 160 people with disabilities live and work. In addition, the association operates social gardening, sheltered workshops and recreational facilities, and develops projects focused on ecology and sustainability.

community center and a park in front of the castle, and is supporting the renewal of the railway connection with Brno. Cooperation with architects and landscape experts, who are involved in the development of the urban structure, has been important.

The municipality faces challenges related to legislative restrictions and communication with the state administration, but its projects have gained recognition and are inspiring other municipalities. The city's future includes the construction of a car-free ecological district, which would be the first of its kind in the Czech Republic.

Case study 5: Neratov in the Orlické Mountains – From a defunct border village to a place of hope, social life and community

Area: 8.1 km²

Population: 65 inhabitants (+250 workers and inhabitants with disabilities)

Neratov, a small village in the Orlické Mountains, is an exceptional

example of renewal and community building in a region devastated and abandoned after World War II. Originally an important Marian pilgrimage site, Neratov almost disappeared after the evacuation of the German population in 1945. By 1989, the village was completely abandoned, with a crumbling church and only three permanent residents.

Significant challenges have been securing finances, legislative issues, and a shortage of labor. Despite this, Neratov has managed to become a sought-after destination for pilgrims and tourists, with a strong emphasis on community life, ecology, and the restoration of the cultural landscape. In the future, it plans to build a home for seniors and therapeutic workshops.



Figure 6 Neratov: The renovated Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, featuring a glass roof, serves as a symbol of the village's renewal and development
Source: Ben Skála

4 Conclusions

At this stage of the project, based on the above case studies, common key factors leading to the successful protection, restoration, and development of the landscape of small and medium-sized municipalities can be defined. Projects vary according to local specifics and needs, but they all have the following strengths in common: high-quality and capable municipal leadership or strong engagement of local residents, systematic strategic planning, a sensitive approach to cultural and historical values, and the integration of ecological and environmental solutions. It turns out that, in the long term, quality cooperation with experts is essential for municipalities, preferably in the form of interdisciplinary teams. Another finding of the project is that a strong municipality is an inspiring example for surrounding municipalities, and success and sustainability are supported by good relations with neighboring mayors, municipal representatives, and local associations. Long-term continuity in the conceptual approach is a key factor, which, in addition to quality municipal leadership, requires the support of active community citizens. A change of mayor and council in a municipality is often a risk factor for the achievement of long-term goals.

For other municipalities that want to work conceptually with the landscape, we can therefore recommend the following: The first step should be to involve local residents and stakeholders in the planning and implementation of the projects, which will strengthen project acceptance, long-term support, and sustainability. Furthermore, it is important to look for funding opportunities – not merely using subsidy programs is key, the specific needs of the community need to be taken into account, as well as having a long-term vision and funding of projects ready. An emphasis on linking environmental solutions such as landscape revitalisation or water retention together with the development of the public space is important – this will help municipalities respond to climate challenges and promote the quality of life of residents. Linking environmental, cultural, and historical values is very important to creating a quality environment and spaces with which residents identify and develop personal relationships.

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