
PRAGUE - CULTURE OF LIFE AND ENVIRONMENT

Mission of GAIA AGENCY in the context of city of Prague strategy

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Some time ago, there was a discussion in Czech media about our country's vision of the future. In the discussion, it was mentioned that our country is lacking a mission and then Prague, the capital, too. What does it mean? It refers to the future and to an ideal situation. It is about our imagination, how we can see our cities or country in the perspective of a few years. The perspective is given us by our imagination, because many of us might not live to see it in real life. By the way, centenarian lime-trees, which made our communities so picturesque and sometimes still do so today, were planted by our grandfathers and grandmothers with the idea that their shade and beauty would be admired by someone else – their descendants.

So, what do we imagine about our mother Prague in the future as a capital of our state? I explained my vision about how I would like to live, to someone in a survey. I said I would like to live in a Prague suburb in a small house with a garden. Out of this small house, I would like to walk to my work on foot through greenery or to ride a bike. I imagine the oasis of vegetation with fountains and playgrounds. These green paths would cross through Prague, so I could visit my friend on the opposite side of the city to have coffee with her, nicely through the centre, and it would be a pleasant Sunday trip. The green path would lead me naturally out of the city accompanied by the singing of the birds, perfume of flowers and voices of playing children. For a while I would ride my bike, a moment later I would walk, sing and exchange some words with people walking by. I imagine Prague as a green city, city for life - not for cars.

How much does my vision of Prague resemble to the ideas of our elected city representatives? I am opening an expensive-looking edition of the Strategic Plan of Capital of Prague where I see the smiling face of a former mayor. On the second page

there is a picture of the Dancing House and the explanation. *“ The Strategic Plan should show the real way to prosperity, health and cultural environment and to preservation and development of these values for which Prague is considered as one of the most beautiful cities in Europe and in the world. **There is nothing about greenery and green paths.***

On the next page there are pictures of officials, and a graph of the organizational structure which shows how the territorial plan of the city relates to strategic plan. It reveals the relations to the city districts, its citizens, business people, ministries and corporations.

When I turn the paper, I see a map that is usually seen in planes. Europe, with a circle in its heart and from there lines spreading to all sides. The title of the chapter is "Opportunity and challenge" and these lines lead towards the European community. **Not a mention of greenery and green paths.**

The next page starts with the title "Global changes" and we can read: *“Continuing devastation of nature and exhaustion of sources led to an internationally shared necessity to increase the responsibility of our generation for the conservation of natural sources and environment for future generations as expressed in the principle of sustainable development.”*

There is a graph with expert research and public opinion survey according to which Prague should be a city of culture, education, international relationships, science and research, tourism, services, financial industry and production. **Not a mention of greenery and green path.**

On the bottom there is an inscription in bold print: *“ The future vision of Prague is a successful city, prosperous, internationally respected, a creative city, friendly and safe, city of equal opportunities and active citizens, city of a harmonious environment - natural and urbane. A city functional by the quality and reliability of its transport systém and technical infrastructure, as well as a performing and helpful city management.” **Not a mention of greenery and green path.***

This is followed by a detailed elaboration of the strategic vision into strategic directions, strategic aims, policies a programs, while: *“The highest priorities for the continued development of Prague are those strategic directions and aims, which will contribute most to fulfill the complex vision of a successful future of the city, particularly to ensure a good socio-economic environment for its inhabitants, to reach world criteria of performance in the different spheres of city life, to respect the principles of a sustainable development and to foster the growth of self-esteem of citizens and the whole community.”*

Many resounding words, but do we have a similar notion of what these words mean? It seems to me that the strategy presented lacks a coherent, simple, long-term vision. Like the one I came across at the conference of environmentalists in the danish town of

Aarhus. On all the city maps, it said **“Aarhus, green city”** and on all the schematic drawings the seaside city was surrounded by green lungs. All know that it is necessary to subordinate and adapt all ambitions of economic success and respectability to this vision for the quality of life derives from it. How do we assess the quality of housing? By the space and greenery around it or a shopping mall and eight-lane highway under the windows? We find the quality of the environment only on page thirty. On page thirty one, there is a mention that: *“The greenery in the city represents the continuity of natural elements in the midst of city buildings and often constitutes a last remnant of the original environment.”* The aim is: *“To attain a permanently sustainable quality of the environment in Prague as harmony between urban and natural environment.”*

Is such an idea of the quality of environment realistic, when it comes behind the economy and prosperity? How come that the planners of our future do not realize that the environment in which we live constitutes a given framework, on which we must base ourselves and to which we must adapt?

The city of Prague is part of the Czech nation. The city strategy is derived from the strategy of the country as a whole. When free market and free trade constitute the Holy Writ of today and we live in order to do business, then it seems to me that consumerism is today's religion. If I am no follower of this religion, I am in the situation where I have to create my own alternative life style and my personal, alternative world in order to be satisfied and to live in harmony with my conscience.

In my presentation, I plan to mention those of our activities that are related directly with the city of Prague, its greenery and its citizens; I would like to speak about GAIA Agency's independent "ombudsman activities".

“Ombudsman” activities

Town hall decisions affecting green areas

We succeeded in getting included in the Directories of the Prague City Town Hall and Prague 2 quarter as a civic association, which is informed about all planned interventions which will affect green areas within the territory of Prague City.

“Road to Europe PET though a waste dump of plastic bottles ”

Agentura GAIA reacted by calling a protest against the decision of the Julius Meinl company that, starting on 19.10.1999, it will stop distributing mineral water in glass bottles whenever these have been replaced by disposable PET bottles, advising the public: Try

not to buy PET bottles, and if there is no other option, then return them to the sales intermediaries or write complaints. We have picked up the thread of our 1992 activities, when we have addressed ourselves to the Czech National Council requesting a law which would impose on the producers the duty to watch over their products “from the cradle to the tomb”. At that time, we were told that it was a question of each producer’s ethics, that the law cannot contemplate everything down to the last detail...

“Americká Street”

120 underground parking places located in Americká Street in Královské Vinohrady, apartment houses and the said garages instead of the former Waldes mansion, as a result of which the present greenery would become considerably reduced.

“Grébovka”

Precisely now, when we are supposed to celebrate “Prague 2000 – European capital of culture”, a private dance conservatory was evicted from the premises of Grébovka in the park of Havlíèkovy sady in Prague 2. The school direction asked us for help. We gave them moral support, advice and legal counseling; the future of the school is still uncertain.

“Zvonarka”

We organized a petition of architects and artists protesting against the plan of building a residential and administrative center Na Zvonøce, Praha 2. As a result of our action, the project has been suspended by the Ministry of culture.

“Mammoth on the square”

We organized a petition of some 1000 persons on the Charles Square protesting against the building of an administrative center directly across from the Church of St. Ignacio of Loyola. The project that won the approval of the Prague Town Hall is an ugly monster, which would constitute a new dominant by the park.

“Na Plzence”

Together with the civic association Obèané Smíchovu (Citizens for Smíchov) we committed ourselves to an effort to reverse a mistaken decision of the town hall of Prague 5, which authorized the destruction of a playground for children, which is being replaced by a workshop for painting cars.

“Prosek”

There was a plan to build a construction material warehouse on the sandstone buffs at the Prosek prospect, right next to boyscouts clubrooms. The territorial decision and the construction approval proceedings have already been completed, we found out about the project late; in spite of that on the basis of our intervention the plans to build were suspended and we were promised that the natural site would be preserved.

Agentura GAIA was set up in March 1997, registered as a civic association. Agentura GAIA is independent by nature and looks for new ways of communication among people in the sphere of environment, education, work with children and culture. Special emphasis is laid on a holistic approach to life. The association's activity is based on democratic principles. It is founded on the activity of its members.

"Agentura GAIA aims at improving the relationship of human beings with the environment and among themselves"

We are dedicated to the following main activities:

"Green means life " - the aim is the comeback of trees to the streets of our towns and municipalities.

"Women and the environment" – which stresses the feminine approach to life and meaning of life. We build on the increased interest of women – mothers in the environmental issues.

"Your money or your life" – looking for the ways out of the world-wide environmental crisis through better management, gradual steps and everyday efforts of individuals.

GAIA Agency Pro-active strategic actions

Log rolling

On 4 August we organized a symbolic "Log rolling" happening from Lublaòská street to Legerova in Prague 2, by means of which we called attention to the dirty and untidy streets, the Prague traffic, the discrimination of pedestrians and favoring of cars...The action was a great success and met with a wide public acceptance.

Magic for the Earth

In the manor park next to the elementary school and kindergarten in Pilská ulice, Praha 9 Hostavice, we completed the second stage of the reclaiming of the park with the financial contribution of the Prague City Municipality. By means of festivities which took place on 30.4.1999, we encouraged the parents and the children to take interest in what happens around their school and kindergarten. The festivities under the name "Magic for the Earth" were attended by the children from the local school and kindergarten, their parents, teachers, people from the locality, local authorities and sponsors. Our volunteers and their friends prepared a rich cultural program, refreshments were served, many games and activities, including the election of the Queen of the Witches, were organized for the children.

Ecolife

In May and November we present every year a healthy lifestyle, health foods and our programs at the Ecolife exhibition at Národní dum in Praha-Vinohrady.

Kubelíkova

At the suggestion of our member, co-worker and resident of the Prague quarter Žižkov, Barbora Sadílková, we addressed ourselves to the City quarter Praha 3 seeking their support for greening the street Kubelíkova in Prague 3. We invite you on October 20th this year.

Street open to life

In Prague 2, Lublaòská street, we organized on 21.3. 1999 a happening, linked to the maintenance of the surrounding of the trees we had planted. We worked together with the young people from the Diagnostic Institute, the media showing great interest all the while.

Do you know your vital space?

The procedures for the community joint work on the clean-up of the backyard space behind the houses in Radhoš•ská street. The present state of the backyard is a classical example of a devastated, trampled down dog toilet. Our aim is to reclaim the space working together with the town hall and the local people, so that it will correspond to the needs and wishes of the local population.

Buy a tree of your own

We print stickers "Buy a tree of your own" of 50 Kč value. The yield from the sales of the stickers will be used to continue with the project "Green means life". The Ministry of Interior granted us the authorization to organize a public collection.

Dialogue for the 21. century

On the occasion of Earth Day 1999 we organized a dialogue between Agentura GAIA and the firm Shell ČR. Together, we opened the debate on the topic of responsibility for the state of the world and the vision of the future.

Ecological road to a common Europe

The project under this name, with the support of the Foundation ROS and MZV ČR and the recommendation of MŠMT ČR was inaugurated in September 1999. Its aim is to carry out an objective informational campaign before the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union, reflecting the widest range of the varied aspects this step in international politics means. The program will take the form of lectures, discussion forums and didactic games at schools of all levels. It is a work based on dialogue, searching for and understanding connections, ability to orient oneself in the news, the art of asking questions and take interest in one's surroundings. We are working with children at selected schools, using teamwork. The aim is to foster independent thinking about oneself in the context of nature, one's community, one country and the European Union, the courage to express one's opinion. With the children from basic school Pílská, we organized before Christmas a charity activity "Christmas tree for the children from the Dolní Poèernice orphanage". Gifts for the orphanage were bought with the product of auctions held by the pupils from the basic school; these were handed over later, in the presence of the children.

LES - local economic network

Under the wings of Agentura GAIA the first exchanges of services of the LES system began to take off. It is a neighborly help in the community, a model which works successfully in several places in the world under the name of LETS. A catalogue of services and a list of participants came out and the first membership meetings were held.