

Litomyšl Opens Renovated Riverfront with an Unconventional Playground for Children

Litomyšl (3 June 2017) – Nearly five years after the project "Restoration of Loučná Riverfront in Litomyšl" was officially launched and a year and a half after construction work began, the Vodní valy locality was opened to the public on Saturday 3 June 2017. The program of the opening ceremony, which included a celebration of the International Children's Day, was mainly dedicated to the youngest visitors. Apart from creative and sports activities, attending youngsters could for the first time try out a unique children's playground.

The aim of restoring the Loučná riverfront near Smetana Square was to revive functions the locality once had, but has since lost due to insensitive urban planning in the second half of the 20th century. The main objective was to make the river once again a part of the city's everyday life, to create a space people can use for pastime activities, and to establish a close connection between Litomyšl's historical district, the riverfront, and the park adjoining the Smetana House.

The design was selected as part of the Proměny Foundation 2013 Award, an architectural competition whose parameters were formulated in consideration of a survey of the needs and preferences of frequent visitors to the Loučná riverfront. In response to suggestion made by local inhabitants, architects Martin Rusina and Martin Frei prepared a design that has allowed the locality to retain much of its natural character. At the same time, the concept provides a link between the formerly separated Vodní valy Street, the riverfront, the river itself, and the park adjacent to the Smetana House. The focal point of the transformation was the riverfront promenade with a playground for visitors of all ages, a space for an outdoor café, and various types of seating arrangements. The playground fixtures feature a novel design that incorporates sound-related motifs that associate the site with the legacy of the music genius of Litomyšl native Bedřich Smetana. Improved access and new ways for crossing the river have been provided by crossing stones, a new suspended bridge, and lifting piers, which are reminiscent of yesteryear's clothes washing area. An unshapely waterworks building above the river has been transformed into a lookout. A seating area below large trees with a green-roofed pavilion for entertainment events has been built in the park adjoining the Smetana House.

"The new design of the locality is both bold and playful. Most importantly, however, I hope that the city's inhabitants will find it functional. I'm confident that Vodní valy will become a sought-after part of the city, where people will come to spend their free time. I want to express my gratitude to the Karel Komárek Proměny Foundation, the architects, and everyone else who has contributed expertise and hard work to the project," said Mayor of Litomyšl Radomil Kašpar during the opening ceremony.

The planning of the transformation of Vodní valy began in 2012, but the beginnings of the project, subtitled "Dialogue between Town and River", go back to the years 2010 and 2011. *"The plan to restore the riverfront area in Litomyšl was originally presented as an initiative of the local community and the city fathers. We decided to lend our support behind this transformation venture because local people expressed keen concern in the locality, were willing to contribute their time, and took active part in the project,"* explained the Proměny Foundation's founder Karel Komárek. In addition to over seven million crowns from its own resources, Litomyšl has received over 23 million crowns in financial assistance under the Proměny Foundation's Parks grant program. Reconstruction of a part of the roadway and sidewalks in Vodní valy Street, also designed by architects Rusina and Frei, necessitated another

investment of close to eight million crowns. The contractor for the riverside restoration project was Litomyšl Loučná Eurovia-Vykrut s.r.o. Construction work began in February 2016. *"The project was challenging, but attractive and interesting at the same time. The architects were able to provide a design that sensitively interlocks the restored locality and the surrounding area, and creates a peaceful relaxing atmosphere,"* said Chief Construction Manager Petr Boukal in describing the transformation of the Loučná riverfront.

An iconic part of the project is the abovementioned children's playground, which features fixtures with artistic themes designed by sculptors Pavla Sceranková and Dušan Zahoranský. *"The riverside provides an ideal setting for designing a playing area that can function as a playground and, at the same time, as a place interconnecting the pathways along the river. We wanted to follow in the footsteps of the tradition of artistically designed playgrounds from the 1960s, which has faded away in the past two decades in part because of stricter legal requirements for children's playgrounds and in part because of concerns that facilities featuring artistic motifs would be too expensive and their construction overly complicated. Our goal was to design a playground that would be not only functional, but also interesting from the artistic viewpoint,"* explained architects Martin Rusina and Martin Frei.

The works, which bear such names as Ear, Crystal, Mountain, Lochness Monster, or Zigzag, provide an unconventional alternative to traditional playground fixtures, and their design features various motifs of sound and music. *"Thinking that building a playground of this kind is an unachievable task because of strict regulations is wrong. It's all about enthusiasm and willingness to walk the extra mile. With some effort, the goal can be achieved,"* added sculptors Pavla Sceranková and Dušan Zahoranský. One of the new symbols of the rejuvenated Vodní vally is a long red wall that passes through the entire area on the right side of the river. Attentive visitors will find that the wall contains recollections of people who grew up in the Vodní vally locality, and have remained emotionally attached to it. Recollections of local inhabitants were also included in an exhibition organized by the Karel Komárek Proměny Foundation to accompany the opening ceremony for the Loučná riverside restoration project.

Throughout its execution, the project was open to people from the local community. In addition to their initial participation in the formulation of the parameters of the architectural competition, a number of activities and public meetings were organized during which the architects presented details of the project to local inhabitants, and responded to their inquiries and suggestions. For instance, the consultations resulted in a change of the width of the Vodní vally roadway for car parking needs.

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