**The European Centre for Education in Geology in Chęciny, Poland**

Geology students have been coming to Świętokrzyskie Mountains for their university practices for over 50 years. The Client, Warsaw University, decided to use European Union funding to invest into a new educational complex, where scientists, students, but also children and youth could come and stay to use the research and learning opportunities of the site. The location of the new investment was selected at the bottom of the depleted quarry in the proximity of Chęciny castle, one of the major tourist attractions in this area. The centre was named The European Centre for Education in Geology (ECEG), aiming to reach people interested or working in this field from both Poland and abroad.

In the competition, held in 2011, the first prize was granted to Marek Budzynski, an author of a number of public buildings in postmodern style, full of symbolic motives. For ECEG he proposed a series of buried buildings covered with greenery. The competition rules allowed for further negotiations with the 1st and 2nd place winners. Since WXCA’s proposal and fee turned out lower and technical performance of the buildings better than the winning entry, the commission was granted to the young Warsaw office. WXCA is one of the most successful young Polish architectural practises, one of the few with successes abroad (ie. the office won Baltic Sea Park competition in Estonia). They already have a lot of experience in designing public buildings and recently WXCA won two major competitions for public spaces in Warsaw – boulevards along the Vistula River and street redesign in Praga district.

The competition brief was pretty clear – the Client requested a number of independent, 2-storey buildings of different functions, including labs, learning spaces, accommodation and a canteen. This is exactly what WXCA proposed – five objects linked with a glazed passage. They alternate which results in creating open views towards one side – either the mountains or the quarry wall – and courtyards on another. One of the quarry solid rock walls is exposed in the underground auditorium. Some other ‘harsh’ and raw finishes, like exposed concrete, were also used in the building. All facades are composed as contrasting composition of local limestone walls and modern, flat glazed screens providing the views. The minimalist architectural language of the complex does not attempt to mimic the surrounding nature. Its simplicity seems to refer to Chęciny medieval castle composed of simple, geometrical shapes of walls and towers, built of the very same stone as ECEG facades.

Over 90% of ECEG’s energy supply comes from green sources and the roofs, apart from supporting solar thermal collectors, are covered with the same planting as surrounding grasslands. Not only technical solutions but also such sustainable construction strategies like reducing transportation carbon footprint since local material was used. Also excavated stone was reused in the construction of the pathways and the aprons around the buildings. It made them blend better with the surroundings, so that they seem to be growing out of the quarry pit. Even though such design decisions may seem as a literal translation of the quarry landscape into architecture, it is more of a respect to the site and its rocks as a source of both knowledge and material.

Monika Arczyńska