The project aimed to create an outdoor learning space in a city that has a personal and direct relationship with the land and the natural world. Through diverse educational activities at JUME, we co-created knowledge and skills that will empower young people to be proactive agents of local change to global challenges.

For my internship, I worked with Jānis Ķīnasts, who is passionate about place making and an active community member in Cēsis. We co-founded Cēsis Pluriversity, an organization that creates sustainable cultural, economic, and social models for the future through education. In 2020 we held the first summer school where, through a collective co-creating process with the participants, we developed a vision of an outdoor community space that combined learning, gathering, and gardening in the public landscape of Cēsis, a project fosters wider healing with ourselves, others, and nature. Growing food and gardening is one of the most direct ways that connects humans with the natural world. A public space centered around gardening allows residents to explore questions about interactions between humans and nature—interactions that Guntra Aistara, one of the mentors for the project, calls nature culture, recognizing the interconnectedness of both processes.

I grew up in post-soviet Latvia. The country has experienced immense change since regaining independence in 1991; however, the legacy of fear and habits that the regime left are still present today. The average age in Latvia is 43.9, which means that most people have directly experienced these troubling times—times that are present in the collective memory. Most of the towns fail to create an environment that appeals to and offers opportunities for young people. I was one of those young people who did not see their future in Latvia because I wanted to learn in a way that was holistic and relevant to the urgencies of our time. Programs that I took part in inspired me to seek out alternative, life-changing learning opportunities. I feel responsible for creating similar experiences for others.

The project this summer was part of the democratic conversation festival, LAMPA, where participants discussed not only what it means to be a contemporary Latvian but also to understand values we need to cultivate. In a discussion panel I moderated, Laura Šmideberga, a director of a National Latvian Culture organization, highlighted that we as a nation have not freed ourselves from the past occupation and oppression the Soviet regime and Empires imposed. I think that deeply links with the lack of peace that many people carry within themselves. The meaning of peace in this project continuously unfolded through the different engagements that we organized.

Peace to me is an integral part of anything I do. I see peace as a state of balance where we do not have to harm the environment around us, something we do by how we engage with the world. We are polluting and harming our bodies, communities, and ecosystems and not understanding how and why. Learning helps to untangle the complexities, which I see as a step towards a more peaceful world. When we harm the environment, we harm ourselves. By creating a space to treat plants and soil with respect, we began to take steps toward integral peace. Through the project JUME, I have witnessed that caring for a shared land creates new kinds of realizations.

I was inspired to take action as a response to COVID-19 pandemic conditions. JUME is a project of hope for a shift and not return to the “old normal.” We reimagined a safe way to gather and creatively use the potential of the outdoor public landscape. Students from the local Cēsis Art School spent most of the school year online. We started to work on the project site by collaborating with the art school students and the sustainable art festival, GreenFest. Through collaboration, the students were able to finally meet in person and work for two weeks creating pieces of art with land as the focus.

However, the indirect effect of the pandemic was more challenging to the project. In the past months, the price of lumber increased dramatically, which completely changed the estimated expenses for the proposed building structures. When unpredicted challenges become an everyday reality, I advised everyone to trust that the limitations are there to make space for better-suited ideas and creative solutions. This mindset gave us greater resilience that was evidenced later in the process. Instead of building ourselves a tool shed and storage space for community-supported agriculture goods, we refocused on first establishing trustful relationships with the partners. Art Residency Center Rucka, which is located right next to the project site and provided us with a space in the unused building right next to the garden for the tool shed. This challenge allowed the project to create a closer relationship with another important local partner for initiatives in the future.
While working on the site, I realized that everything I anticipated at the start takes much more time, not only because I was facilitating this kind of process for the first time, but also because it takes time to build trust with all those involved in a new place and the project. I learned so much not only about work that involves getting to know many different people in the community but also how collaboration takes place—sometimes people want to help but fail to fulfill their promises. Implementing the proposed goals, in reality, is full of unexpected challenges. For me this was one of the hardest lessons. But after struggling to modify my personal expectations and recognizing that this is a long-term project which will evolve with seasons, I enjoyed the way JUME brought people, nature, and learning together.

One of the challenges we encountered in the process was developing the composting system—a process that was complicated by the Spanish slug, an invasive species that carries disease. Because the original composting design did not correctly eliminate access to the area, we created conditions that increased the overpopulation of the slug, which could contaminate the compost and harm the garden. We had to pause and limit adding any resident food waste during this season in order to rebuild the compost structure and use the cold winter conditions to naturally eliminate the slugs. Even the challenge of not having an active composting system was a necessary lesson and marked the way changing climate conditions impact Latvia locally.

While initially the goals of this project were quite practical, the whole process and idea became so much more than I anticipated because of the people who got involved and the connections that were made. With the help of a group of locals, we built six raised beds, beds which were built to be self-sufficient for many years by creating layers of organic matter that decomposes and keeps the soil fertile. The beds were planted with seeds that were donated by a local seed saver and with seedlings which we bought in the local market. By the end of the summer, the tool shed was filled with tools to maintain and nurture the garden. We harvested sufficient vegetables to help feed participants in the Cēsis Pluriversity Summer School; the rest of the food was donated by community-supported agriculture farmers. We started building a terrace and dome for the greenhouse, which will be finished next season.

Amanda Strīgele, director of co-working Skola6, was one of the local people who took care of the garden and participated in the summer program. In the weeklong program, we explored the ways through which the garden as a place enables kinship. This weeklong exploration will be used to further develop learning activities in JUME in the coming seasons. Together with 24 people who blended the lines of lector, mentor, and participant, I saw a new community unfolding: One where learning is not led by imposed rules but co-led by values that encompass inclusive, supportive, and above all environmental practices based on peace with all life around us. The program provided an opportunity to develop future plans for JUME and other collaborations; these would not have been possible without the Project for Peace funding that allowed us to come together and collectively plan.

Living in the city of Cēsis over the span of summer while implementing the project allowed me to appreciate the place and the way like-minded people meet and inspire great actions by being the example themselves. I have personally witnessed the formation of new community bonds through the creation of JUME, which has inspired me to create a permanent home of my own in Cēsis and continue the work that Projects for Peace support initiated.

“A garden created with an intention to be a learning place can be a liberating sanctuary in times when the formal learning institutions and work places for many meant spending months indoors in confusion and separation. Hands in the soil to grow communal food is a simple act that gives us the peace to get through hard times—when the harvest comes, we find hope and realize that together we can get through anything.”

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