

THE “TEN PERCENT” CONCEPT



**Krzysztof Kubasek,
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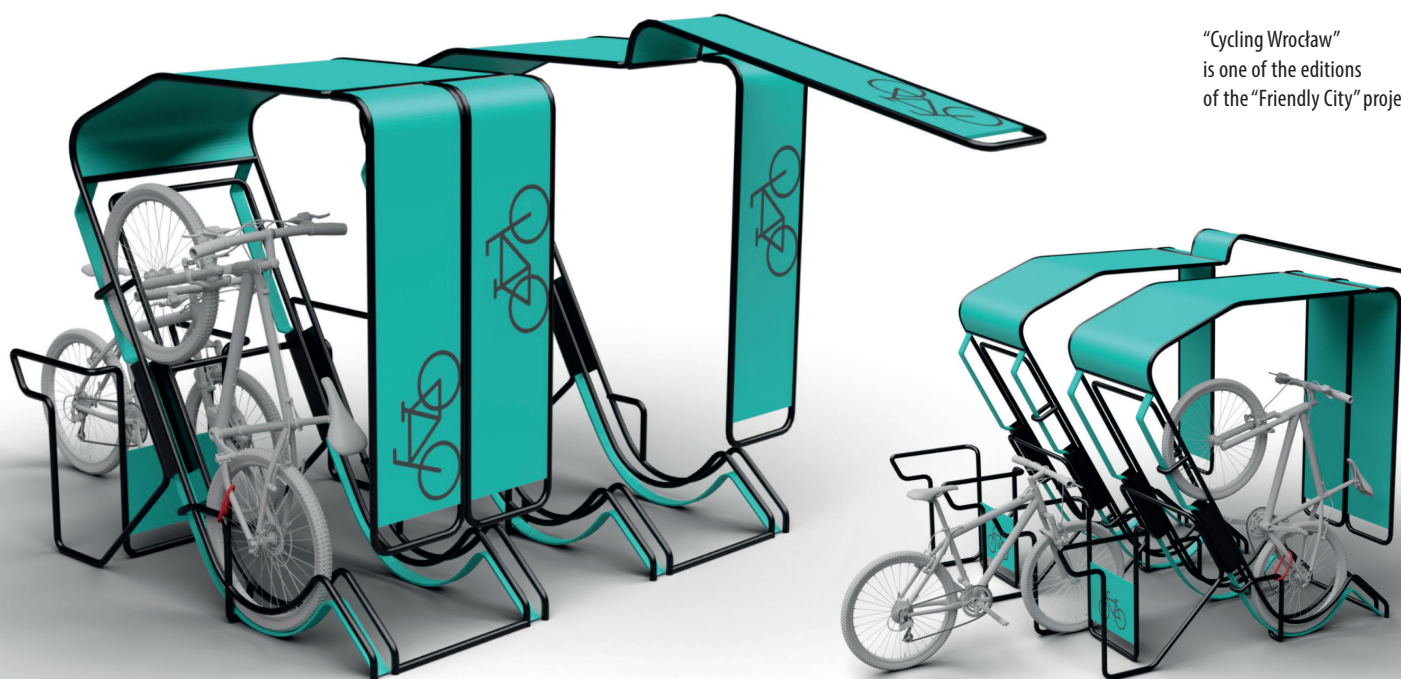
Krzysztof Kubasek from the Socially Oriented Design Studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław shares his perspective on how design should go beyond aesthetics and profit, to prioritize serving society.

You were awarded last year’s “Cultural Prize” in Poland’s Silesia region. Your projects not only promote the city of Wrocław internationally but are also accessible to its residents in their day-to-day lives. How did all this come about?

KRZYSZTOF KUBASEK: My first encounters with socially oriented design were in the field of robotics. For example, I worked with researchers from the Wrocław University of Science and Technology to design the social robot “Emys.” Initially, it was developed as a research tool – a robot capable of reading and expressing basic human emotions

like fear, embarrassment, sadness, anger, and joy. As a designer, I was particularly fascinated by the psychological aspects of human-AI interactions: how people, including seniors, engage with such machines and how useful they can be as assistants. The project evolved into a successful start-up, attaining international recognition and eventually becoming available as “Emys for Kids,” a robot that now effectively helps children learn foreign languages.

Another impetus for turning toward socially oriented design was my doctoral research on sustainable, ecological design. As I immersed myself fur-



“Cycling Wrocław” is one of the editions of the “Friendly City” project

ther in the topic, I was struck by the sheer amount of misinformation in this field. Products marketed as eco-friendly often are anything but. Combatting *greenwashing*, as this practice is called, naturally led me to focus on social and inclusive design – design that centers on humans but does not elevate them above others. Humans are part of an ecosystem that includes plants and animals. To me, the cities we live in are like a cohesive tissue, a living organism. This is what I strive to convey to my students in the Socially Oriented Design Studio. Wanting to ensure their talents are put to meaningful use and their projects don't go to waste, I began collaborating with the city of Wrocław. This partnership has since sparked numerous initiatives.

What kinds of initiatives?

One example is the “Friendly City” project, which my studio runs in collaboration with the Smart City

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Office within the Promotion and Tourism Department at Wrocław City Hall. Each semester, my students and I grapple with real urban challenges and try to design practical solutions. Increasingly, more instructors from the Department of Design are joining the project, and this year's edition also includes the Department of Interior Architecture. This multidisciplinary collaboration enables us to create solutions that improve residents' daily lives and make the city more inclusive for everyone, including people with disabilities and other groups needing support.

The first challenge we took on under the “Friendly City” initiative was improving cyclist safety and developing cycling infrastructure. Next, we focused on pedestrian infrastructure. We also addressed the issue of the declining municipal marketplaces in Wrocław, seeking ways to revive them. This year's edition focuses on urban parks and green spaces, with students analyzing the challenges and problems in Wrocław's green areas. Throughout these and other projects, I prioritize inclusive design.

What's “inclusive design” all about?

Such projects go beyond artistic pencil sketches and focus on solving real-world problems. I teach my stu-

dents that at least 60% of their work should be dedicated to understanding the problem itself. Before they start designing anything, they must gather data – know who they are designing for, why it matters, what purpose it serves, and whether it contributes to something meaningful. Participation is also key – bringing in experts and end-users to be part of the design process.

Some time ago, the Wrocław Academic Center invited us to work on a social project for one of Wrocław's care homes as part of the Wrocław Academic Task Teams initiative. The garden space at the facility was completely neglected and was mostly used by local vagrants. This home serves as a day care facility for people with various health conditions, primarily seniors. We conducted in-depth interviews with the residents, as well as with the local community. Additionally, lecturers and members of student associations from two other universities – the University of Life Sciences and the Wrocław University of Science and Technology – joined the project. The students consulted with professionals specializing in design for people with disabilities and experts in urban greenery and landscaping. The first results of the community garden, designed for and with the involvement of seniors, can now be seen on Ciepła Street in Wrocław.

Who else do you involve in the design process?

Anyone and everyone impacted by the project. One particularly interesting experience involved working with children. During workshops, we asked young participants to imagine and design objects they would find useful. My design studio's role was to turn their ideas into something that could be feasibly manufactured. This process led to the creation of the “OIO” foldable desk, which doesn't require screws, and the “Wisiak” table, which uses a wall as its main support.

I also enjoy working on projects that incorporate advanced technologies. In collaboration with the City

Soofa – a prototype therapeutic toy designed for children with sensory integration disorders, intended for social welfare centers and care facilities





“Emys for Kids”
– a social robot

of Wrocław and Nokia, I developed an experimental project for “smart” bus stops. These would be made from sustainable materials and enhance residents’ safety by, for example, measuring their temperature or responding to someone fainting. To ensure the bus stops were accessible, we consulted individuals who are blind or live with other disabilities.

You mentioned treating the city as a living organism. What are the challenges in designing a healthy urban ecosystem? What are we missing?

I think the biggest gap is education. There’s a lack of reliable information that empowers people to live more consciously in urban environments. While city officials are increasingly addressing some issues, it’s essential for them to collaborate with leading experts in fields like ecological design.

We also need to raise awareness among residents. People should understand what happens to the waste they generate – just because it’s out of sight doesn’t mean it’s gone; it’s simply being stored or managed someplace else. This comes down to knowledge and a sense of responsibility.

Lastly, I believe education around personal health is just as important. I plan to involve my students in designing solutions for urban green spaces, such as educational paths or health trails, to help the public better understand health and wellness in their daily lives.

Do you have any professional dreams?

I do. I dream of creating a team of experts at my university – or perhaps on a larger scale – focused on addressing the world’s most pressing problems, like hunger or limited access to clean water. I hope to secure funding from institutions and philanthropists to support this effort. My goal is for us to design and implement solutions that strive to tackle real issues faced by real people. It might sound idealistic, even naïve, but I truly believe in the “ten percent” concept.

What’s this idea?

It’s a concept from Victor Papanek, the author of *Design for the Real World*, a book that has greatly influenced me. The idea is simple: each of us should dedicate 10% of our time to non-profit work. Just ten percent – time devoted to helping our local community, supporting those around us, and using our skills and talents to work toward a better world.

People are incredibly effective and united in *reactive* efforts, as seen in the tremendous response to the recent flooding in Poland. But what’s often missing is a *proactive* approach to preventing such crises. Imagine how much better and healthier our reality could be if we consistently devoted that 10%.

I’ve found my way to contribute to making the world a better place, and I encourage everyone to reflect on how they can do the same for their community.

INTERVIEW BY **PATRYCJA STRZETELSKA**

Further reading:

Norman D., *The Design of Everyday Things*, revised ed. 2013.

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Rifkin J., *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism*, 2014.

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