

Pedagogical Experiments on Territory in Schools of Architecture: from Puerto Rico to Belgrade¹

In architecture, urbanism or landscape, the development of an integrative look at the built environment is done through a learning process based on multiple cross-referencing. Following on from the two previous books published within project “On Being With-it: Pedagogical Experiments on Territory at EAUM”, this third book presents nine texts by foreign professors and researchers who visited the School of Architecture at the University of Minho (EAUM) over the past few years, or with whom EAUM City and Territory professors share a disciplinary proximity.

The main goal of this book is to contribute to the questioning and enhancement of the pedagogical practice of what we can call “being with-places”. Recalling that in learning one can summon people and places whose physical, social or organizational non-proximity could justify a distancing, these texts introduce several learning methodologies linked to actual experiments. However, they do share a common principle: the learning laboratory is often the territory where universities are located. Through a careful look at each of the pedagogical experiments, this book enables confrontation, exchange and knowledge. The distance that separates Puerto Rico, France, Barcelona, Nigeria, Rome, Albania, Istanbul, Serbia and São Paulo from each other is easily overcome by the affinities between the pedagogical strategies that each author develops in each university and city.

Calling into question the teaching of architecture centered on a design culture of “extraordinary” buildings (Habraken, 2005), Andrés Mignucci from the School of Architecture at the University of Puerto Rico proposes a theoretical basis for an experimental pedagogy of cities, territories and landscapes grounded on fifteen fundamental concepts, namely: change; time; memory; intertextuality; levels; binding observances; territories for inhabitation; permanence and change; relativity / ranges of continuity; the everyday environment is the theme of architecture; type; theme and variation; public space continuity; reading-writing / reading-writing; and transformation.

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Proceeding then to France, Eric Alonzo brings us the experience within the pedagogical project of the School of Architecture in Marne-la-Vallée, which re-establishes the very discipline of architecture through a holistic perspective by postulating the “elimination of compartmentalizations between the academic subjects of territorial planning.” The originality of this proposal, as an alternative to understanding landscape and territory from a multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary viewpoint, lies in rethinking architecture “from within” and as an expanded field (Krauss, 1979).

As a continuation of the reform introduced by Manuel de Solà-Morales in the 1970s at the School of Architecture in Barcelona, Eulàlia Gómez describes the two second-year courses that introduce Architecture students to Urbanism. With Barcelona as their study laboratory, the first course focuses on the design of the city's structural elements – streets, squares and blocks –, while the second course, called «The city piece by piece», introduces students to the geography of the city and respective constituent parts, challenging them to create their own cartographies. Both courses end with a design exercise whose pedagogical goal is to reinforce the notion that the analysis design is not an end per se but the foundation for an intervention.

Anchored on the intersection between theory and practice, Gbemiga Faniran’s essay documents the multiplicity of teaching methods implemented in the training of urban planners under the Diploma in Sciences in Urban Planning at the University of Obafemi Awolowo (UOA), Ile-Ife, in Nigeria. Self-learning and peer learning are duly emphasized, replacing a more professor-centered teaching.

From their experience with the course called «Arti Civiche» taught in the Department of Architecture at the University of Rome Tre, Francesco Careri and Maria Rosso propose «walking as a method of research and action». By narrating a learning experience entirely done on foot in the city and never within the classroom, the relevance of “lost” time stands out while questioning the functionalist view of time and “not having time for”... which stifles so much contemporary teaching practices.

The essay by Lllazar Kumaraku and Ledian Bregasi from the Faculty of Architecture and Design at POLIS University in Tirana, Albania, challenges us with a teaching methodology applied to a specific project called «Akademia 100+ Fshatrat». In the scope of this project, the motto is «school takes to the streets again», but this time to participate in a program of the Albanian government targeting rural development. In this reality that calls for rapid interventions, it is questioned the linear time of the design process – in which the project follows the strategy that follows the analysis –, giving rise to time synchronisms in which the phases intersect or reverse.

Next we travel to Istanbul with Sevgi Türkkan. Once again, the learning laboratory is the very city where the School of Architecture is located. As in the essay by Careri and Rocco, walking is again a critical practice, which in Türkkan's own words also calls into question the “over-reliance on plans, maps, aerial views, etc., in perceiving and representing the landscape”.

Vladimir Bartalini from the School of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo also brings us the act of walking as “one of the access doors to the landscape”, as a

phenomenological experience that allows us to create an “involvement with”. In a poetic shift, Bartalini’s essay ends in the philosophy of concrete things: in this case, the Água Preta stream in the southwest area of São Paulo, only uncovered by the walker who knows how to recognize its traces in the urban entanglement that eventually concealed it.

Finally, within the scope of the cooperation protocol between municipalities and the School of Architecture of Belgrade, the Urban Management course presented by Uroš Radosavljević and Aleksandra Đorđević discusses not only the challenges facing an educational model that works with multiple agents, but also the mutual benefits: both for the learning process of the students while involved in a complex context of "real life" and for communities in terms of local development proposals to support local self-governing in Serbia.

By reading these texts, one can’t help but to assert that in this new decade the teaching of city and territory issues persists in overturning more traditional limits such as those of the classroom, the university, the canonical city, or the limits of most common research methodologies. These limits are shaken because the school sits in the city and the city is an increasingly vast territory that requires “a good pair of boots” in order to be reached. Access to the territory is favored by the act of walking, with student and professor getting into the shoes of explorers. The objective is to attain a deep and often performative immersion in the territory in order to acquire knowledge. Only through the direct experiencing of large infrastructural systems such as those in Catalonia, or of fishing communities such as those in the urban area of Istanbul, or of the social space of Rome’s suburban enclaves, or of informal settlements such as those in Tirana, is it possible to feel the pulse and complexity of a territory.

Experimentation enables identifying filters and questions in order to later confront and positively use the contradictions and the abundance of information — namely the unlimited information available in the virtual space. Experiments remind us that another form of knowledge is needed, “a holistic, intimate knowledge, that does not separate us from, but rather connects us personally with, whatever we study. The uncertainty of knowledge, which modern science has always viewed as a technical limitation to be gradually overcome, is transformed into the key to understand a world that must be contemplated rather than controlled” (Boaventura, 1999 [1987], p. 53).

Routines common to more conventional pedagogical structures are being continuously shaken. Both in the city and in the territory, students detect an increasingly complex spectrum of occurrences that puts pressure on the conventional pedagogical organization. Although classrooms may still be needed, and certainly good books, little can be done without effectively getting closer to the places under study, without implementing new routines and new times: the time of a semester; weekly time; the time between two classes; the time of a community; the time of politicians; the time of a cultural event; the time of a popular festivity; the time summoned by a specific question posed by each student. Surprisingly, through imaginative thinking, the pedagogical experiments oscillate between the typical regularity of the university organization, the intensive nonstop sessions, the night periods. They push and tear the limits of calendars, or may even linger over several curricular units.

Pedagogical experiments increasingly demand an effort of coordination and synchronization, and this reality is all the more necessary because the pedagogical practice of architecture does not give up thinking about transformation, about the project, seeking instead to increasingly become applied research, in which research and action, analysis and transformation, do overlap. This promotes simultaneity between analysis and thinking about transformation, because the process of knowing each place can never be concluded – it always remains active, unceasingly evolving and renewing itself. At every turn, renewed associations and new syntheses can be made, and thus the relevance of phenomena changes.

Given the limitations of this publication, the texts were subjected to space restrictions, namely regarding the inclusion of the diversity of graphic elements that are developed within the scope of these experiments. However, their exploratory features allow the reading of phenomena via a fertile interaction between perception, register, imagination and conceptualization. It is at the level of (re)connection, of the effort to represent a complex reality and its (re)imagination, that the main differences can arise. It is in the domain not only of the instruments of representation, which are central to the practice of architecture and urbanism, but also in the critical capacity of its actors that the integrity of the discipline can be duly ensured. And to duly ensure that, at the end of increasingly complex disciplinary interactions, one has not contributed to the discipline's own dilution but, most importantly and fundamentally, to its capacity to contribute to the consequent change in the planetary territory which we all inhabit.

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