WHAT IS OPEN ARCHITECTURE?

The built field – bigger than any profession and following its own laws - embodies environmental patterns and social structures of influence and responsibility, where conventions, levels of intervention, and shared themes frame our professional contributions. Both everyday and exceptional places coexist in the built field, in which designing, and innovation, are continuous processes. Teaching principles of open architecture is thus very important in helping students understand how the built field works, and how we might intervene to make it better.

Open Architecture concerns at least three main principles. The first principle is change; the built field is never finished and changes part-by-part. We thus find ourselves being invited to propose transformations to a built field that is continuous across time and space, proposals that are requested, approved and implemented by others, for use by still others.

Second, we find ourselves, as professionals, working on levels of intervention, such as urban design, building design, interior design and so on. These levels are a reality independent of any professional claim. The idea of levels is familiar to those working on projects in which higher-level designs are made (by teams of experts from many disciplines) providing “capacity” for subsequent inhabitation, without the need (or usually the possibility) to specify the lower level decisions, decisions that are invariably made on the time axis by others in any case.

Third, and linked to the idea of levels, we recognize that built environment comes into being and transforms by way of distributed design. This means that no one party designs everything. Except for the rare case, where one person is responsible for every design decision, design tasks are distributed among a number of parties, including many specialists, non-professionals and also users. For example, when we design an office building, a number of experts are needed to complete the design of the core and shell, or base building. Later, tenant spaces are designed by teams from those that designed the base building. This is common in shopping centers, hospitals, schools, housing and other building use types, and is the way urban design works.

These three principles are very important to understand, especially when design professionals are given large projects to design – horizontal or vertical, newly built or involving the reactivation of existing buildings or built fields. When projects are small we can more easily hold on to the romantic idea of the master architect/builder. But in large projects, professional designers and their clients have learned how to conceive, partition, phase and coordinate the work of many players. In some cases we set the stage for others to play on (when an urban design plan, devised by many specialists working together, sets the “rules of the game” for lower level interventions to follow over time). In other cases we take part in an environmental game the rules or themes of which we were not asked to formulate but which we must nevertheless follow (or try to persuade others to change). We see an example of this when we fill in a tenant space in an office building designed by someone else, or design a house in a streetscape whose ecology and typology existed before we were born.

The built results of our efforts and collaborations may frequently be disappointing, but it is not for want of hard work on the part of dedicated practitioners and their development partners. The evident shortcomings of many projects in modernist times, especially large ones - evident around the world - may be in part due to the fact that the three principles noted above are not discussed enough, nor the next generation of practitioners prepared with the skills, attitudes and methods needed to handle this work well. The traditions we come from are evidently not congruent with the today’s challenges.
The problem is international in scope. Because little shared or explicit understanding exists about these principles, and because such large and complex projects are difficult for a single person to design, few are assigned in design studios. When they are, they are conventionally treated as just another large undertaking under single-handed and unified control, which makes little sense. Or, they are treated as so-called interdisciplinary student projects, in which confusion often is evident about the disciplinary knowledge base from which students can connect to their peers in other disciplines.

How can environmental design education – around the world – do better in meeting these challenges? How are we doing and what needs to be done?

**WHAT ARE DESIGN EXERCISES?**

In teaching design, some of us employ methods that can be called DESIGN EXERCISES. Built around a particular selection of design constraints, issues or themes, such exercises are similar to those used in learning a musical instrument, or how to play a sport. They contain a limited number of “moves”, and can be done again and again, each time being perhaps more difficult, allowing the student to hone their skills and develop greater confidence. In this sense, they are not “studio projects” in which the expectation is a completed design with a program and a site, yielding a fully synthesized proposal. Design exercises can be long or short in duration, handled by individual students or small groups, done singly or in a developmental sequence of increasing complexity and difficulty over the course of an academic term or longer.

It goes without saying that neither design exercises or the methods they relate to can replace enthusiasm, talent and imagination. But without the skills and confidence exercises help students develop, their design endeavors may falter under the pressures and complexity of contemporary practice, and may well fall short of the excellence we aspire to. We may be suffering the plight of the jilted suitor when we try to contribute to the built field, not for lack of passion but for lack of sharpened and demonstrable skills and knowledge. It also goes without saying that the idea of DESIGN EXERCISES is not exclusive to education for an open architecture.

During the conference, we hope to “run” two or three short and intense Design Exercises. These will be done with Ball State architecture students, or students brought with the colleagues whose exercises are selected to be “run” at the conference. Prepared before hand in some detail, like design “charrettes”, these Exercises will begin on the afternoon of the first day and conclude at noon of the last day of the conference. They will be presented and discussed on the final afternoon in a final plenary session.

So, in addition to papers discussing teaching efforts in relation to the conference theme, we also seek paper proposals that are descriptions of DESIGN EXERCISES, their rationale and their underlying theory, how they have been used and reflections on how well they have worked (if they have been tried out). IF AN AUTHOR WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A COMPRESSED VERSION OF THEIR EXERCISE “RUN” AT THE CONFERENCE, THIS SHOULD BE MADE EXPLICIT IN THE ABSTRACT, AND A BRIEF DESCRIPTION GIVEN OF HOW THE AUTHOR WOULD DO IT, HOW MANY STUDENTS WOULD IDEALLY BE INVOLVED, AND SO ON. If the exercise is selected, the author will be invited to prepare the exercise in coordination with the conference organizers prior to the conference.

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