

Riccardo VANNUCCI

FAR from home - Architects from the border



FAR Laboratory of Construction and Architecture

Design studio BA5-MA1

Design studio BA6-MA2

2023-2024

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Theme

The border to which we refer is the geographical border and also the limit of the architectural discipline.

The two-semester program is focused on the theme of architecture in the domain of international cooperation, on the dual front of humanitarian aid and development. The use of these terms is in itself problematic and requires caution: the expression 'development' is today, perceived in its political dimension, full of ambiguity, and the very distinction between development cooperation and emergency cooperation tends to become less and less defined.

The program is in continuity with previous experiences conducted within the Lab. The design studios respond (also) to the interest of many students about the reality of a sector, and a professional market, that are expanding in relevance and presence in the media.

From this point of view, the proposed content is intended as an exercise centred on the relationship between ethical commitment and the limits of disciplinary/professional instrumentation, in contexts that are, by definition, foreign, and distant, not only geographically, from the student's reality.

The student is actively confronted with many of the issues central to the debate today, not only architectural: responsible use of resources, inclusiveness, impact of climate change, participation, transcultural relations. The close relationship with reality implies the need to measure, literally, the project in terms of economic feasibility and overall sustainability. A particular aspect then concerns the relationship between different cultures: the proposition of a functional program that in part opposes local practices and traditions is itself controversial and must be handled with caution.

The fundamental issue of the relationship between functional program and context acquires special value under these circumstances: the possibility of operating at a distance, and the limits of this condition, must be reconsidered in the light of the opportunities made possible by the communication techniques and information available today.



The Women's House of Ouled Merzoug, **Building Beyond Borders Hasselt University**, Ouled Merzoug, 2019

Content

The choice of the two functional program is highly topical and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, adopted by the United Nations in 2015.

The specific object of the first atelier is a women's centre, located in a sub-Saharan country. The subject of gender equality appears to be increasingly more of a priority than any other instance and brings fundamental, and sensitive, social, cultural and political issues out into the open.

The transition from a development project to one associated to an emergency can be understood as a progressive radicalization of the challenges that are proposed to the student. In fact, the program of the second atelier will be related to humanitarian aid, namely the construction of classrooms and playground within the Al Zaatri refugee camp, in Jordan.

In this case, the issues with which we are confronted are various, from the very notion of emergency (the camps have a lifespan that is enormously longer than that of the crisis that generated them, or the crises are anything but transitory), to the practical management of settlements that can reach dimensions comparable to those of a city.

Both projects refer to real conditions and circumstances which refer not only to the local environmental situation but also to the need to measure, literally, the project in terms of economic feasibility and overall sustainability. Exemplary of this aspect is the case of sanitation, apparently an exquisitely technical subject, which in these projects is crucial. The whole dimension of construction is inescapable, precisely because it is tackled in conditions of extremely limited means.



Hollmén Reuter Sandman, Women's Centre, Rufisque, Senegal, 2001

Objectives

Considering the current media favour of these kind of projects, it is crucial to develop a critical reflection on the assumptions and implications of them, beyond their photogenic appeal. Ethical concern does not justify simplifications and/or errors. Not only the type of project to be produced but also the manner of its communication must be scrutinised.

However, what appears crucial is to establish a balanced relationship between the general elements that come into contact with each other and the specificities of the sectoral context of international cooperation; it is a question of trying to answer questions such as:

- to what extent, and under what conditions, can the architect make a useful and significant contribution to cooperation projects?
- is the instrumentation with which the architect is equipped (intellectual, technical, expressive) adequate or must it be reconsidered, and how?
- what feedback can be expected, precisely on the architect's identity and instrumentation, from design experiences in such extreme and alien contexts and conditions?



Sharon Davis Design, Women's Opportunity Center, Kayonza, Rwanda, 2013

Method

The teaching method is based on critical reflection, to be applied to the various elements that come into play in the development of the project:

- the remote and unfamiliar context, which requires a 'remote' territorial analysis, in which information and data are selected and processed correctly to determine an action strategy
- the program, also unusual (at least in some of its aspects) and to be interpreted according to categories that consider the cultural distance between those who design and those who will use the project
- the inevitable references and architectural precedents which, to be pertinent and relevant, must be carefully contextualised, well beyond their iconic value.

The theoretical dimension of the exercise is based on a few assumptions: the conventional and therefore arbitrary nature of the notion of 'architecture', which translates into the centrality attributed to space as a material of architectural quality; the role of the typological approach as a specific field of synthesis of the binomial construction/form; the responsible use of resources as an essential term against which to measure the value of the project

The practical dimension, in line with the profile of the Laboratory, has a fundamental importance: the tutoring activity is central in this sense, and the direct experience in the field is made available to the students as an opportunity for comparison and verification.

A particular aspect of the exercise is the necessary integration of competences: the conditions in which these projects take place impose that peculiar multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach (architectural) that today very often seems to be lacking in the fragmented and sectoral production typical of rich economies.



Zaha Hadid Architects & Education Above All, Tents for education, shelter, clinics, Turkey, Pakistan, Yemen, Syria 2015-...

Tutoring is a central element of the whole design studio experience. It is the moment of confrontation between different experiences, and sometimes positions, where very often fundamental questions of communication arise.

The balance between the students' need to experiment and express themselves freely and the teachers' mandate to guide, support and stimulate their work is often unstable and difficult to achieve. In the absence of pre-established formulas, everything relies on the ability to dialogue constructively and the clarity of the conditions under which the experience is conducted.

Projects are reviewed in such a way as to emphasise the incremental nature of the project experience, so as not to dissipate the efforts made and to maximise the active participation of the students. From this point of view, an attempt is made to interpret the substantial difference between instructing and educating.

The general approach is to provide students with references within which to operate, and also with templates to be respected, but then to allow and indeed to encourage initiative and autonomy in the formulation of their proposals, subject to the need to give clear and coherent reasons for their choices.

The design studios are in direct connection with similar experiences carried out by the Laboratory in the past years: this allows and indeed demands a critical look at what was set up, and what was produced, in those circumstances.

The sharing of such experiences is an integral part of the teaching process, which is intended as a pragmatic process in respect of which not a few academic conventions can be reconsidered and, if necessary, set aside.



Cameron Sinclair and Pouya Khazaeli for Relief International, Schools for Refugee Children, Za'atari Refugee Camp, Jordan, 2015

Practical and organizational aspects

GROUP AND/OR INDIVIDUAL

The particularity of the topics covered, the coexistence of students belonging to different years of the course, the results of past similar experiences suggest a considerable flexibility as regards the practical organization of the design studios: students are left free to work individually or in groups up to 3 people, as well as the definition of what is appropriate to produce in order to fully present their work, both as a finished product and as an account of the process carried out.

The pros and cons of the two formulas depend on various factors and are largely subjective. The constitution of the groups and the management of their internal dynamics are obviously left to the initiative of the students. For organisational reasons, it is possible to modify the constitution of the groups, including the decision to work individually, no later than the beginning of the third week.

Any balance between what is produced by the groups in relation to their numerical dimension constitutes a potentially controversial issue, which the design studio intends to address and resolve realistically considering the relationship between the number of students and the amount of material produced, with the case of individual work as an extreme. Two elements are at stake here: on the one hand, once the minimum required is met, the quality of the work includes the appropriateness (completeness, coherence, clarity) of the information generated, on the other the project lends itself to being tackled with different levels of in-depth analysis.

BACHELOR AND MASTER STUDENTS

The design studio includes Bachelor and Master students. The management of the two types of students must consider not only the different position in the training process but also the slight difference in the time nominally available for the exercise (two hours less per week for Bachelor students).

These issues will be addressed collegially when the working groups are set up.