FAR Laboratory of Construction and Architecture

Design studio BA6-MA2

2025-2026

FAR from home - Architects from the border

WARGAMES

Early Childhood Development Centre in Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan

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This document outlines the planned activities for the design studio, as well as key organizational aspects related to its practical management.

The design studio is part of a two-semester program centred on the theme of architecture within the context of international cooperation, addressing two primary areas: development (Fall Semester 2025) and humanitarian aid (Spring Semester 2026).

While the two studios share several common elements and are conceptually aligned—drawing on the Laboratory's previous experiences—they remain distinct in terms of specific content and focus.
Although the overall approach is predetermined and reflects the broader educational objectives of the program, certain elements may be revised during the course in response to the dynamic and essential interaction between instructors and students.

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FAR FROM HOME
ARCHITECTS FROM THE BORDER

The border as a disciplinary and geographical threshold

The border is intended as both a physical boundary and a conceptual limit of the architectural discipline, particularly when examined through the lens of humanitarian design.

Given the current media spotlight on such projects, it is essential to foster a critical reflection on their underlying assumptions and broader implications—beyond their photogenic or promotional appeal. Ethical concerns alone cannot justify oversimplification or error. It is not only the nature of the projects being developed that warrants careful examination, but also the way in which they are communicated and represented.

The terminology itself—such as "humanitarian aid" and "development"—is inherently complex and requires cautious use. The term “development,” increasingly viewed through a political lens, carries considerable ambiguity, and the distinction between development cooperation and emergency response is becoming progressively blurred.

This program builds on the Laboratory’s past experiences and responds to a growing interest among students in a sector—and an emerging professional field—that continues to gain visibility and relevance in public discourse.

In this context, the design studio is conceived as an exercise in navigating the intersection between ethical commitment and the limitations of disciplinary and professional tools. These are explored within environments that are, by nature, foreign and remote—not only geographically, but also culturally and socially—from the students' own lived experience.

Within such frameworks, the relationship between functional programme and local context becomes critically significant. The possibility—and limitations—of operating from a distance must be reconsidered in light of current communication and information technologies, which offer new opportunities but also raise important challenges.

OBJECTIVES

Pedagogical intent and design approach

1. The project proposed is outwardly conventional—comprising standard architectural representations such as plans, sections, and elevations—but it is situated in an extraordinary context: remote, extreme, unfamiliar, and fundamentally unknowable. It features a precise and demanding functional program.
2. This serves as a pretext: a gateway into the specialized field of international cooperation. Though this field demands respect and sensitivity, its very "otherness" can offer fertile ground for the neophyte to engage with it constructively and critically.
3. The studio adopts a disenchanted perspective—steering between the poles of demagogic exoticism and technocratic reductionism—and aims to strike a delicate balance among often conflicting demands: sustainability and development, participation and responsibility.
4. The work calls for a shared, pragmatic understanding of key concepts—building, architecture, design, project—and an approach that treats design as a complex, multidimensional, multidisciplinary, iterative, and incremental process.
5. It invites critical reflection on the tension between ethical intent and architectural practice—on the limitations of terms like humanitarian design or social architecture, and on the adequacy of disciplinary tools, especially in a moment when the very nature of architectural practice is undergoing renewed scrutiny.
6. This aims at resulting a radical project, not in its formal language, but in its method and intent. It is guided by principles that, while clear and directive, are open to challenge when justified. Everything—from process to output—may and should be questioned.
7. The ultimate aim is twofold: to respond effectively to the functional brief, and simultaneously to transcend it. Fulfilling requirements is essential, but not sufficient; correctness is necessary, but not the final goal.
8. Even in architectural education and training, a critical stance toward the status quo—toward the “business as usual” mindset, which must be acknowledged—should drive our actions.
9. In this regard, particular attention is paid to the role of technique, often ambiguously positioned as the key to project success. Mastery of technique is essential—not as an end, but as a means to independence and authentic creative freedom.

ASSUMPTIONS

Realism, Pragmatism, and the Architect’s Role

The design studio embraces a realistic and pragmatic approach to architecture.

Its close alignment with real-world conditions necessitates a rigorous assessment of projects, particularly in terms of economic feasibility and overall sustainability.

A key dimension of this realism lies in navigating cultural intersections. When a proposed functional program contrasts with—or even contradicts—local customs and traditions, it becomes inherently controversial and must be approached with sensitivity and care.

The studio addresses transcultural dynamics, a theme especially pertinent in post-colonial contexts. These dynamics intersect with broader societal concerns that extend far beyond architectural practice: the responsible use of resources, social inclusion, climate change, and participatory processes.

These themes frame the central questions that drive the studio:

> To what extent—and under what conditions—can the architect make a meaningful and effective contribution to international cooperation projects?
>
> Are the tools traditionally associated with architectural practice—intellectual, technical, and expressive—sufficient for such complex and unfamiliar contexts, or do they require redefinition or expansion?
>
> What kinds of feedback or transformation might these experiences generate in relation to the architect’s identity, role, and methods?

These questions underscore the studio’s broader aim: to critically explore the limits and possibilities of architectural practice within extreme, remote, or culturally unfamiliar contexts, encouraging students to reassess not only what they design, but how and why.

APPROACH

Rethinking architectural agency

Within this framework, the design studio positions architecture not as a neutral or purely technical discipline, but as a practice inherently entangled with social, political, and ethical dimensions.

Students are asked to grapple with the limits of disciplinary autonomy, recognizing that architectural decisions carry implications that extend well beyond built form. In contexts marked by inequality, displacement, or post-crisis reconstruction, the architect's interventions are never ideologically neutral.

Rather than seeking definitive solutions, the studio promotes a methodology grounded in critical inquiry, iterative testing, and adaptive learning. The complexity of working in unfamiliar or unstable environments requires an openness to ambiguity and contradiction, as well as a deep respect for local knowledge systems and lived experience.

The pedagogical aim is to cultivate an architectural mindset that is both strategic and self-aware: capable of addressing concrete functional needs, while also interrogating the conditions under which design becomes meaningful or legitimate.

Ultimately, the design studio is less about producing finished objects and more about developing a process-oriented, ethically attuned practice—one that is capable of responding to pressing global challenges without losing sight of context, community, and consequence.

LECTURES

Thematic Framework

Ex cathedra lectures are concentrated in the early stages of the design studio, leading up to the mid-term review. These sessions establish a shared foundation for the work to follow, focusing on the articulation of core concepts and methodological tools.

Particular emphasis is placed on:

- Establishing a shared vocabulary around fundamental architectural and conceptual terms
- Examining the tension between the heteronomous nature of the project (shaped by external constraints) and the autonomy of the architect, particularly in relation to context and opportunity
- Highlighting the existence and relevance of design methodologies as a means of structuring and guiding the creative process
- Framing the architectural project as a synthetic act, where diverse forms of knowledge—theoretical, intellectual, technical, and expressive—are brought together and integrated

These thematic axes are explored through a series of focused discussions and lectures, which address the following topics:

1. International cooperation: frameworks, limitations, and aspirations
2. Colonialism, post-colonialism, neo-colonialism: historical and contemporary implications
3. Territorial focus: Africa, with particular attention to South Sudan
4. The design brief: constraints, opportunities, and interpretation
5. Buildings and architects: case studies and critical positions
6. Topology, typology, technology, morphology: key design parameters
7. Requirements and attributes: programmatic needs and architectural response
8. Architecture as ethics and aesthetics: beyond form-making
9. Projects and representation: tools, media, and modes of communication
10. Architectural composition: ordering principles and spatial logic
11. The design process: phases, feedback, iteration
12. Resource management: material, economic, environmental
13. Project critique: critical thinking as a design tool
14. References: canonical and non-canonical, disciplinary and extra-disciplinary

These lectures aim to provide students with the intellectual scaffolding necessary to engage with complex and often ambiguous design challenges. They serve not only as an introduction, but as a framework for ongoing reflection and critical positioning throughout the course.

GUESTS

External contributions and critical dialogue

The design studio is enriched by the participation of external experts, whose contributions serve to broaden the scope and depth of the discourse. These individuals are involved in a range of activities, including targeted presentations and participation in both the mid-term and final reviews.

Guest contributors are selected based on the relevance of their expertise, the insightfulness of their professional or academic perspective, and—most importantly—their ability to engage in constructive, dynamic dialogue with students.

Particular attention is given to inviting figures who combine professional practice with academic involvement, ensuring that their input is both grounded and reflective. This dual orientation fosters interactions that are rigorous, relevant, and responsive to the complex nature of the studio’s themes.

In order to ensure continuity and coherence in the critical evaluation process, the same external guests participate in both the mid-term and final critiques. This consistency helps maintain a shared evaluative framework and allows for a more nuanced understanding of each student's development over time.

TUTORING

A structured dialogue

Tutoring is a core component of the design studio, shaping the entire learning experience. It represents a space of dialogue and confrontation, where diverse experiences and, at times, divergent viewpoints meet. These interactions often bring to the surface essential questions around communication, interpretation, and authorship.

Tutoring is articulated through three complementary formats:

Thematic Seminars

These are open-class sessions designed to explore issues emerging organically during the course of the work. They address themes proposed by the instructors or requested by students, and serve as a platform for collective reflection, clarification, and critical deepening.

Project Workshops

These are immersive, participatory sessions where groups work closely with the instructor in a collaborative setting. Their goal is to help overcome moments of stagnation, refine ideas, or stimulate intra-group dialogue. These sessions typically last 30–45 minutes and take the form of working meetings, rather than formal critiques.

Project Reviews

These are shorter, more focused interactions aimed at monitoring project development and resolving specific design or technical issues. Reviews are typically 15–20 minutes per group, and emphasize targeted feedback and progression checks.

This multi-layered tutoring structure supports a dynamic and responsive learning environment, balancing guided instruction with student initiative, and fostering a culture of ongoing, critical engagement.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CENTRE IN ZAATARI REFUGEE CAMP, JORDAN

The object of the design studio is an Early Childhood Development Centre in Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan.

The issues with which the students 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.

The design brief refers to real conditions and circumstances: this implies not only to consider and respect the local environmental situation but also to the need to measure, literally, the project in terms of economic feasibility and overall sustainability.

PRELIMINARY TASKS

At the outset of the design studio, three preliminary tasks are undertaken before the official start of the project. Each task culminates in the production of a final A1 presentation board that comprehensively addresses the assignment objectives.

These tasks are designed to be progressive and iterative. In the week following each assignment, students and groups participate in a review session to discuss their initial proposals. Based on the feedback and insights gained during these discussions, it becomes the responsibility of each student or group to refine, adapt, and enhance their work throughout the course, ensuring continuous development and improvement of their design concepts.

TASK 1: CONTEXT
The exercise is aimed at familiarising the students with the context; groups are asked to plunge into the physical and symbolic reality of the context as understandable from the available documentation.

TASK 2: DESIGN BRIEF
A critical analysis of the design brief is required, which also includes the possibility of modifying some of the proposed functional and symbolic contents, with justification.

TASK 3: CRITIQUE
Students analyse projects produced for the same context and with the same design brief in order to exercise the critical action that the design studio assumes when it is presented as '*Thorie et critique du projet*'.

PROJECT

The project is structured following the format commonly used in design competitions: a design brief grounded in a specific context, with the goal of eventual construction. This requires the production of a comprehensive set of drawings—including plans, sections, and elevations—that are coordinated and consistent with one another, as well as a physical model that complements the graphic documentation.

While this approach may differ from the typical methods used in international cooperation projects, it is intentionally adopted here to anchor the design process to the creation of a conventional, tangible deliverable. Such a product is accessible and understandable to non-experts, helping to avoid overly self-referential or indulgent tendencies that are often prevalent in contemporary design practice.

This framework encourages clarity, discipline, and a focus on meaningful, practical outcomes.

DELIVERABLES

The required deliverables are organised according to the proposed design process model, and conceived as incremental: they are progressively modified over time.

They range from a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 9 A1 to match the production capacity and presentation strategy of each group, subject to the criteria of consistency, completeness and clarity.

With regard to the use of models, at least one model is required; the choice is left to the students but

- it should be a model not intended for the generic 'promotion' of the project but for the illustration of aspects that cannot otherwise be represented graphically (study model)
- the model must have been produced at least two weeks before the Final critique
- consistent with the spirit of the Design studio, it should be a meaningful model but made with modest materials (paper, cardboard, etc.), limiting waste to a minimum

EVALUATION

The Final Critique will be conducted by a panel of visiting guests, with grading determined jointly by the atelier professors and the guest panel members.

Each panellists will use a standardized evaluation template to provide feedback on students' performance based on the following criteria:

- Compliance with programme specifications and requirements
- Coherence between the proposal and documented site conditions
- Consistency of project solutions in relation to design intentions
- Understanding of construction technology and technical proficiency
- Feasibility of project implementation based on the submitted documentation
- Depth and scope of research, analysis, and information presented
- Effectiveness of communication, including clarity, legibility, and appropriateness of methods

The Final critique, as well as all interactions throughout the studio, are not intended as moments of judgment or fault-finding.
Rather, they adopt a constructive approach that takes into account the context in which the work is developed. Such an approach proves far more valuable and effective in the long term than rigid, dogmatic evaluation.