

Fine art projects in architectural education: a tool for socio-critical reflection

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ABSTRACT: The study of architecture, urban planning and design at technical universities primarily offers a *rational*, technology- and practice-oriented education. The offer of a conceptual and socially critical approach to creation is only represented to a low degree. Students create projects that take into account the latest technical, environmental and architectural trends, but receive few assignments or conceive their designs as specific philosophical statements critically examining current social and political phenomena, whether on a local or trans-regional scale. By implementing courses and seminars with an emphasis on various visual media, students are given the opportunity to analyse issues in spatial themes and statements that they cannot apply in standard architectural design. The authors examine alternative methods in architectural education at technical universities involving intermedia visual arts. They investigate different forms of teaching in selected universities in the Central European context. The article is supplemented with case studies from the Faculty of Architecture and Design at Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, Slovakia.

INTRODUCTION

Artistic creation, by its very nature, engages, connects and interprets perception. Its forms and styles vary in the method of creation, subject matter and aesthetics. A key point is the connection to the periods of realisation, which are often influenced by the political, cultural or social context. Artistic practice, whether one defines art as a contemporary intermedial concept or include it among classical disciplines, is an integral subject that has not received the attention it deserves in creative education at technical universities, precisely because of the large proportion of technical content. The study of architecture, urban planning and design at technical universities primarily offers a *rational*, technology- and practice-oriented education. This education includes traditional teaching methods in the form of lectures, discussions and exercises, which allow teachers to verbally present information to students. However, architectural study is a specific field that also requires creative principles of education and stimulation of interactivity, diverse thinking, communication and philosophical reflection. These considerations were also outlined by the British anthropologist Tim Ingold, who deals with the transformation of methods in architectural thinking through his method of *comparative anthropology of the line* [1].

Ingold's considerations on the forms of *non-linear lines* allow one to overcome the divisions that are deeply rooted in modern thinking between art and technology. The *lineology* project is firmly anchored in Ingold's pedagogical activity, where he collaborates with artists, architects and archaeologists. He explains the meaning of pedagogy from the point of view of lines that refer to two meanings derived from two different etymological interpretations of the verb *education*.

To educate (from the Latin *educare*) refers to the act of providing instruction to students on approved knowledge and on an approved model of behaviour. In the second meaning (from the verb *educere*, which contains the prefix e-, out and the verb *ducere*, to lead, so to draw out, lead out), the goal of education is to move and lead learners into the outside world. The first model (the most widespread today) consists in anchoring students in the models of knowledge and behaviour that dominate in a given cultural context; the second consists in bringing them into contact with the outside world and helping them to orientate themselves in the experience that arises from it. In this second model, education takes place literally *through exposure*, walking in the labyrinth of the world, in which neither the starting point nor the final destination is predefined, *for every place is already on the way somewhere else* [2].

PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE AS A KEY ELEMENT OF ARTISTIC CONCEPT

Education at art and technical universities includes the acquisition of the ability to create designs that meet both aesthetic and technical requirements. Knowledge of the history of architecture and its theory, orientation in related art, technologies and humanities is also required. This knowledge and the level of knowledge of fine arts are also reflected to a high degree in the quality of architectural design. The basic criteria for architectural education vary considerably

from country to country, but the areas of requirements can generally be defined as design philosophy, technological frameworks and professional practice.

Usually, educational programmes include seminars to introduce students to the basic artistic principles of the individual movements that form the basis of fine arts. The authors could define two types of requirements for students in faculties of architecture. One of them is related to science and the other is related to art. What is related to science includes new construction technologies, materials, systems and computer programs. Artistic requirements are related to aesthetic distinction. The variation in artistic aspects varies from one student to another depending on their experience, inclination and specialisation in the field of architecture.

In thinking about the relationship between philosophy and architecture, interdisciplinary points can overlap and come to the fore. Among the most important of these are the language that is used and the space that is represented. The intellectual tools used by architecture and philosophy have certain similarities and differences. During the design process, the architect goes through certain phases of thought [3]:

- Problem identification.
- Information gathering and setting the main idea.
- Creativity and design process.
- Achieving a solution.
- Development process.

Despite the use of various thinking-related links and tools, it is not always possible to speak of a systematic method of thinking. Therefore, it is necessary to ask the question here, whether it is necessary to follow a method in order to create a design in architecture. According to some architects, a method is necessary because today's problems are too complex to be solved by instinct or traditional knowledge alone.

In her study *Philosophy in Art and Architecture Schools: Odos and Methodos*, philosopher Manola Antonioli writes that academic education in art or architecture should be the ideal context for carrying out constant exchanges between impressions, affects and concepts, which are the subject of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's book *What is Philosophy?* [4].

Antonioli further argues that these encounters offer invaluable opportunities for educators to engage with young artists, designers and architects. These dialogues provide conceptual anchors for artistic, urban and architectural projects. In schools, too often, philosophy risks becoming a *touch of the soul*, a superficial intellectual alibi for approaches that do not even include an inkling of the concept [5].

These approaches are being suppressed in art schools by the growing fascination with, and alleged scientific rigor of, engineering schools. In her study, Antonioli further reflects that *...in the general context of hostility towards thinking in all its forms (the vast neoliberal market does not need thinkers, it needs obedient enablers), this teaching is constantly threatened, questioned and probably destined to disappear in the coming years, despite the constant interest of students in these courses and seminars, which allow them to create a certain distance from the frenetic pace to which they have been exposed* [5].

Education in artistic creation at an architecture school could enhance critical thinking, deepen the creative process and increase confidence in exploring the representation of ideas in visual language. Creative subjects allow students to create an intellectual platform for concept formation from their intuitive work. New perspectives and possibilities for educators are presented by conceptual and socio-critical approaches to creation. Unfortunately, these are only represented to a small extent and in connection with other subjects, which is the result of insufficient conceptual studies and an overview of related art, art history and theatre disciplines, which are often the main sources of inspiration for future architects, urban planners and designers.

The problem is that students create projects that take into account the latest technical, ecological, environmental and architectural trends, but they rarely receive assignments or conceive of their designs as specific philosophical statements that critically examine current social and political phenomena, whether on a local or supra-regional scale.

Teaching philosophy could thus help to defend the need for an *inventive faculty of architectural distinction*, as well as artistic distinction or distinction in design, in the face of the use of new technologies that serve only the purposes of automation and the market: the concept of the *smart city* or building information modelling (BIM) in architecture; the extension of service interfaces in design; for art, visual effects in multimedia installations [5].

APPLIED ART PRACTICE

Contemporary pedagogical practice also deals with the question of what tools are needed to develop inventive teaching that would allow students to use the possibilities of new technology without striving for uniformity with an emphasis on the locality's character. However, the teaching method would still create models understandable in a broader context.

A teaching methodology is required that would stimulate the creation of architecture capable of distinction and creativity with a new type of diversity. To create a space that generates new constraints and heterogeneity. Teaching models that are different from existing ones, which focus primarily on the technical aspect of architecture. By implementing art and conceptually ideational subjects, seminars and workshops focusing on various art media, students are given the opportunity to analyse topics and statements in regard to space that they cannot apply in standard architectural design.

The Faculty of Architecture and Design of Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava (FAD-STU), Slovakia, is the largest faculty offering architecture, urbanism and design studies in Slovakia. It ranks among the leading educational institutions that provide its students with a diverse range of subjects with an overlap into art fields, scenography and interdisciplinary installations. This range of elective subjects aims to stimulate the imagination and develop students' creativity, leading to innovative approaches in the creation of technology, science and business. Similarly, these subjects contribute to improving mental and physical health, reducing stress, and fostering communities in the university environment. The artistic projects themselves also contribute to the revitalisation of cities and communities. The interdisciplinary installations enhance attractiveness of the urban environment and support local development.

The impact of art on the social aspects of inhabitants naturally varies depending on various factors, such as the type of art, the context in which it is presented, and the characteristics of the audience. However, in general, it can be said that art has a strong and positive impact on people's social life. Shared art experiences, such as attending a concert, theatre performance or exhibition, can unite people and strengthen social bonds. The outputs of art projects in the university environment also promote dialogue and discussion on important social issues, which leads to better information and understanding among students and teachers.

These subjects are fundamentally based on the realisation of artistic and scenographic projects. Students work in two phases or partial outputs. The first preparatory phase, when students are confronted with socio-critical themes and conceptual creation through a story or personal statement. In the second phase, they are confronted with the realisation of the work, which includes the necessary technical support and project work in a group.

At the FAD-STU, two subjects are currently offered (Ephemeral Art and Scenography) that are concerned with art, space and the related concepts and principles mentioned above.

SUBJECT: EPHEMERAL ART

The Ephemeral Art in Public Space subject introduces a certain type of art and installations that utilises its transience and exists in its space for only a short time. It is primarily represented by installations that are closely linked to experiment, interaction with the environment, unpredictability, and the experience for the viewer or visitor. Unlike traditional permanent art works, such as sculptures in public spaces, ephemeral art reminds one that nothing lasts forever and often uses elements of the environment in which it is located and for which it is created.

Art-based subjects allow students to explore space, material and the limits of their creativity. This is made possible through assigned topical themes that connect to the happenings in the given environment. Socio-critical reflections represent a process of thinking about experiences, thoughts and events in a different way than the teaching of studio subjects in an architecture school.

Students uncover problems and inequalities, communicate openly about them, and are specifically guided by the teacher to translate these issues into a time- and volume-bound installations in public space. The subject then allows for experimentation with the viewer and tracking their reactions, which provide feedback for the students. In addition to feedback, these subjects can lead to realisations that are not a matter of the study course. They thus introduce students to practice and open up new questions in the field of art presentation, architecture and design from the perspective of marketing and communication of a given artistic concept.

The subject is implemented in the teaching process over two semesters during the academic year. In the first semester, students work on a thorough examination of works in public space, new principles and approaches in creation, and interdisciplinary activity in the field of art. They are confronted with specific works in public space and interdisciplinary installations at experimental festivals of visual art. Through discussions and open communication with the teacher, they critically examine the technical parameters and expressive value of the works. They find that the realisation itself is not the goal of success, but is preceded by careful marketing timing and presentation of the work to a wide target audience of visitors.

In the second part of the semester, students work with a specific topic and assignment. Their task is to create a concept, visual and technical design of the work with a comprehensive roof from the point of view of presentation to the audience. Students come into contact with experts in the field of festival architecture, curators, production companies and statics during the semester. The goal is to create a design that can be realised. Students work independently or in small groups. During the semester, several designs are created in this way, which we can implement thanks to grant schemes and prepare students for the world of practice.



Figure 1: Monumental installation *Afloat*, ephemeral project reflecting on the topic of empathy located in the historical part of the city of Bratislava, Slovakia, 2022; authors: B. Kubinský, P. Ebringerová and M. Moravčíková; photograph by M. Mlčuchová.



Figure 2 and Figure 3: Laser installation *Liine*, ephemeral project dealing with the topic of freedom located in the foyer of the FAD-STU, Bratislava, Slovakia, 2023; authors: B. Kubinský, P. Ebringerová and M. Čejteiová; photograph by M. Mlčuchová.

SUBJECT: SCENOGRAPHY

In the Renaissance, architects were often well-educated and versatile artists. They were interested in the visual arts, music, literature and other sciences. Education was a determining factor in shaping opinions in Western civilisation. Opinions that were based on the study of tradition and discovery. Architecture, as a medium that is not fleeting, remains tangible evidence of the time one lives in. The Department of Interior and Exhibition Design at the FAD-STU offers students the option of the Scenography subject, the ambition of which is to extend the concept of architecture to related fields. The aim of the subject is to educate and show students how architecture can function and look like more than just a layout diagram with façades. Within this subject, students are given assignments in which they try to shape the space so that it can also carry relational and narrative collisions. Those that create this space give the layout a sense.

Methods of creating architecture are increasingly shifting towards other disciplines. Architectural discourse, influenced by social or natural sciences, art, creates a still open and complex discussion in the 21st century due to its breadth. Architectural education reflects the need for such creative participation with other disciplines and media at different

levels depending on the possibilities or focus of the university where architecture is taught. This article focuses on the latest trends in the creation of scenographic space, which is closely linked to architectural design. It also deals with the reasons for building such an interdisciplinary educational process. Theatre, like architecture, has always had great power and potential to open up discussion and be a critical mirror of complex political and social phenomena.

Architecture and theatre create visible spatial sources from which one can decipher many social and cultural phenomena. They are a reflection of the time in which they arise and are visible to a wide audience.



Figure 4 and Figure 5: Shakespeare - sonnets, scenography project dealing with the topic of mental health, held in the Emil Belluš Aula of the FAD-STU, Bratislava, Slovakia, 2019; photograph by P. Hurai.

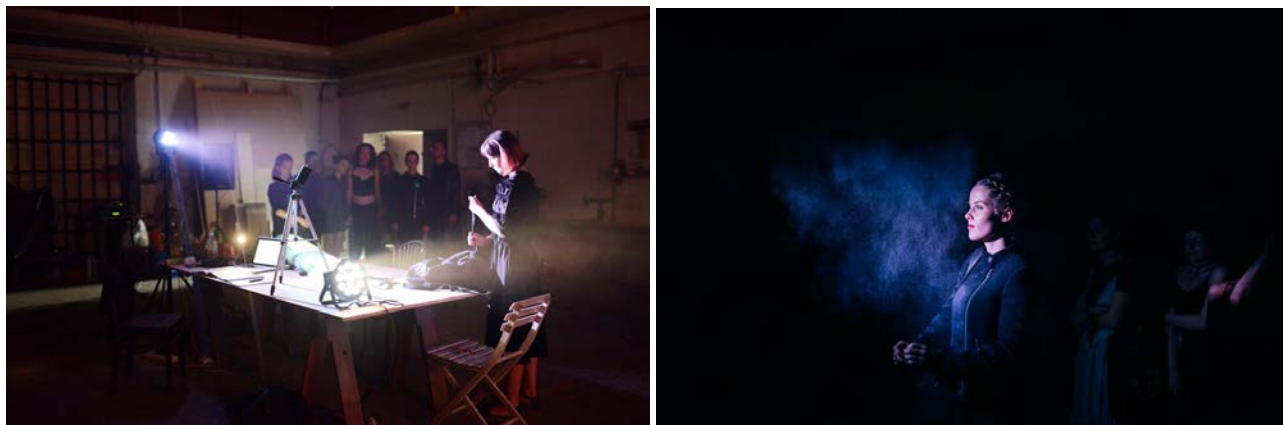


Figure 6 and Figure 7: Abandoned islands, scenography project dealing with the theme of ecology, held in Boiler Room of the FAD-STU, Bratislava, Slovakia, 2018; photograph by P. Hurai.

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY AS STARTING POINTS FOR PHILOSOPHICAL ARTISTIC CONCEPTS

In general, a time is approaching when a new generation of socially-minded students will emerge in their fields of study. Individual fields of study are beginning to be viewed holistically; connecting with other fields and building intersections. More and more young people are studying architecture also out of a desire to shape society structurally and spatially. Ethical and social issues are increasingly coming to the fore in various fields of study.

The University of Stuttgart (Stuttgart Universität), Germany, maps the topic of its own students' interest in contextualising their fields of study. The university states in its on-line journal that the generation born after 1995 is primarily more aware of its social responsibility than older students. While the older generation was primarily concerned with optimising their own resumes and did not have to go into depth on political topics, contextualisation is now also appearing as an important topic among them [6].

Another example is the Technical University of Berlin (Technische Universität Berlin/TU Berlin), Germany which has already linked the study of architecture with the art discipline of scenography in its curriculum in the winter semester of 2000/2001. This initiative at TU Berlin has grown into the creation of a two-year Master's programme in scenography - Scenographic Space. The double profile and strong practical and project orientation are unique in German-speaking countries. This education combines two ways of thinking about the dramaturgical solution of space: on the one hand, the design of stage space for drama, musical theatre and dance; on the other hand, the design of scenic spaces for exhibitions, installations and performances. Based on the concept of *space*, the programme focuses on designs in theatrical, urban and atmospherically exposed contexts.

The aim is to learn methodical and technical strategies for creation using dramaturgical keys in the design of spaces and their subsequent implementation. The field also deals with the experimental development and testing of new forms of interior design.

Tanja Beer is a designer and university lecturer. She teaches future interior designers at the Queensland College of Art in Brisbane, Australia. It is not a theatre school. Nevertheless, it closely links scenography with design. The development of sustainable environments is one of the main subjects that every student goes through at the school. Students receive information about current ecological trends in sustainable design, circular design, biophilic design, and also about the possibilities of applying these theories in practice [7].

The authors also mentioned Tanja Beer, who works in a non-European context, because her approach and principles of teaching and creation are unique and inspiring methods that are reflected on a supranational scale, which is important especially in the European environment. She focuses on connecting art with the landscape and its stories in the context of historical development in Australia. It is precisely this relationship that should be an important tool and part of the collective healing of society. The optimal setting for applying and analysing sustainability is the holistic approach mentioned above in the work. In the research context, it is about intersectionality - connecting the social and cultural dimension with the ecological one.

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of students find visual thinking a valuable creation tool. For future architects it is obvious that every good idea needs to be properly illustrated. Image is a carrier of an idea capturing the author's intentions [8].

For educators, creative education is a priority. The educators' goal is to prepare future architects, urban planners and designers in a comprehensive way, so that they can also think in technical disciplines through philosophical concepts and connections with artistic disciplines and create a better environment for people in cities and beyond.

In various fields of study, ethical and social issues analysed in the form of a philosophical statement through art are increasingly coming to the fore. Artistic practice in one's work becomes a medium through which it is possible to intensively demonstrate the importance of applying environmental and social responsibility in relation to architecture and institutions in various ways. Subjects such as Scenography, and Ephemeral Art function as a site-specific architectural or design philosophical tool. Visual art has been created since the Renaissance in close dialogue with architecture; its role was to bring intense, appealing and deeper messages into the creation of space.

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