

Monitoring Urban Design Education in European Schools of Architecture

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Monitoring Educational Structures

The present volume includes a series of texts that describe courses taught at schools of architecture in Europe and focused on the design of urban space. The collection of these texts was realised and funded by Socrates Thematic Networks, in the framework of activities of the European Network of Heads of Schools of Architecture (ENHSA) Thematic Network.

The basis for the creation of the ENHSA Thematic Network was the need of Europe's schools of architecture to organise a supporting framework in order to integrate themselves into the European Higher Architectural Education Area. Three years ago, eighty schools of architecture undertook, through their Heads of School and Academic Program Coordinators and with the support of the European Association for Architectural Education (EAAE), to coordinate a series of academic activities allocated by the appropriate members of the academic community. These activities aimed at creating a working environment for dialogue and exchange of information, data and ideas, as well as for the comprehensive monitoring of architectural education structures in Europe.

As is widely known, the EU policies towards a cohesive European Higher Education Area, as expressed by the Sorbonne-Bologna-Prague-Berlin process, stimulated a vigorous mobility of ideas and views on the future of architectural education in Europe. The perspective of the creation of a European Higher Architectural Education Area is presented not only as a demand, or as an EU request, but principally as a great challenge: to re-form, creatively, architectural studies in Europe for a more coherent, more qualitative and more attractive European architectural education worldwide. This prospect has triggered the interest of the architectural education community. The central issue in the debates on architectural education today is the way (values, principles, objectives, priorities, methods, strategies and actions) that each school will manage its reform processes in order to be an active, valuable and influential part of this new European environment. Moreover, it is becoming more and more evident that cooperation and coordinated collective efforts are essential to the creation of such a new environment.

In an attempt to promote and enhance the academic physiognomy of European schools of architecture through cooperation and collaboration, ENHSA in the spring of 2003 invited the Deans, Vice-Deans, Heads of School and Academic Program Coordinators to call on their urban design teachers to contribute to the creation of a working document that will be a record of the teaching practices, teaching strategies and pedagogic methods of the subject area of urban design.

This record is incorporated in the present volume, entitled 'Monitoring Urban Design Education in European Schools of Architecture', which will be distributed to all Schools of Architecture, Partners of the ENHSA Thematic Network and members of the EAAE. All the material will also appear on the ENHSA Website (www.enhsa.net), to reach a greater number of urban design teachers and serve as widely as possible as a useful tool. This volume is expected to constitute a starting point for the creation in the near future of a valuable and extended corpus into which all educators can delve for information on the state of the art in urban design education around Europe.

Urban Design Education in Europe

The initiative for the creation of this volume, as part of a broader effort to shape a milieu for exchanges of views, ideas and teaching practices between teachers of urban design in schools of architecture in Europe, was founded on a hypothesis: namely, that urban design constitutes one of the fundamental subject areas in architectural education. This hypothesis was supported by the results of a recent (May-August 2003) inquiry carried out in the framework of the activities of the ENHSA Thematic Network and aimed at recording the state of the art of architectural education in Europe. From the initial data processing stage in a sample of sixty schools it became apparent that, of the average total of teaching hours required for the diploma in architecture, urban design accounted for 7.6%. This ranks the curricular subject area of urban design as fourth in order of importance, after Architectural Design (33%), Building Construction (12%) and Theory-History (8.7%).

It is interesting to note that this percentage, as an expression of the weight given to the subject area, has the following characteristics. The mean, which is 7.6%, is close to the median, which is 7.3%; in most schools of architecture, in other words, the curricular share of urban design teaching is close to the average. The extremes of teaching time in the schools of the sample are 0% (minimum) and 15.56% (maximum).

More teaching hours are dedicated to urban design in schools of architecture with more than 1000 students (9.56% of total time) than in schools with fewer than 1000 students (6.65% of time). This indicates that schools of architecture that are part of a bigger institution tend to give more weight to urban design teaching than do independent higher education institutions. Moreover, judging by the teaching time allocated to it, urban design teaching is considered more important in schools of architecture in Eastern and Southern Europe (17.33% and 16.56% respectively), as opposed to Northern (9%) and Western Europe (10.89%).

The Teaching of Urban Design

Urban design is a special subject area, as on it or through it architectural education invites students to meet, comprehend, integrate and compose knowledge, theories and attestations related to the city as a cultural, social and economic fact. Knowledge and theories that will drive their architectural propositions and test their design skills but will also thoroughly examine their values and approximate or clash with their fresh architectural ideas. Urban design is a fertile platform for the meeting, convergence, articulation and shaping of educational experiences that may yield valuable learning outcomes related to social life in the built environment, to the cultural dimensions of the form and organization of urban space, and to the economic dynamics that control it.

As the debate on architectural education advances and as the details for the content and articulation of architectural studies become central to this debate, the breadth of polyphony in architectural education in Europe becomes evident. Every attempt to investigate and record ends up with a broad spectrum of approaches and views on how schools appreciate the subject area of architecture. This fact is directly translated into a broad spectrum of teaching strategies, practices and methods which, in turn, are reflected in the various skills and competences ensured by the various diplomas awarded to graduates. Our sense that awareness of the existing differentiations constitutes a particularly fertile experience was the departure point for the development of initiatives aiming at the creation of a network of teachers of urban design that will explore these differentiations and arrive at constructive conclusions. The initiative started with the consensus that this information about different teaching paradigms around Europe would facilitate the exchange of ideas and research in urban education, so useful to all eager educators. It is expected that this monitoring would enhance the dialogue among them and enrich their experience in the teaching of urban design. The creation of this volume is the first step in that direction.

Monitoring Urban Design Education

The investigation of ways in which the subject area of urban design becomes a teaching subject was oriented towards two broader categories of issues. The first one concerns issues relating to the content of teaching, and the second to pedagogic strategy and teaching method. In other words, the first concerns what is taught in an urban design course and the second, how this content is taught. The invitation to urban design teachers to contribute to the creation of the present volume was based on these categories.

The invitation was open to all those who felt that their contribution could help the reader comprehend the pedagogy of the subject area, the educational objectives and the techniques, methods and means that ensure the fulfilment of these objectives. Contributors were invited to describe, within certain guidelines, the course they teach, and to explain the overall philosophy of their teaching of the subject area. The number of contributors per school was limited to two, and their task was to describe at most two different key courses for the subject area that could be considered innovative and/or experimental.

The suggested guidelines did not only deal with practical issues of presentation but also prescribed a possible structure to allow for comparability and homogeneity. The descriptions are therefore structured around four key issues, which form the common ground of the presentations.

The first of the issues the contributors were asked to deal was the philosophy of the course, with emphasis on the perception of Urban Design of Urban and Public Space and of the City in general, the educational objectives, the knowledge expected to be acquired and the skills and competences expected to be developed, the priorities and values on which the teaching of Urban Design focuses. These issues may be expressed in the following questions:

What do I teach in the Urban Design course I run? Why do I teach what I teach in the Urban Design course I am describing?

The second issue includes a description of the chosen Urban Design course, the pedagogy and educational method adopted. It was considered useful to discuss the pedagogic techniques and strategies for the development of the course (stages and phases, vehicles, activities, lectures, debates, presentations, visits, bibliography, precedent study, etc.) the issues dealt with at each stage of the course and the reason(s) behind this choice, and the general organization and structure of the course. All the points mentioned aimed at allowing for an explicit and effective description of the philosophy and the educational objectives of the course. These issues may be expressed in the following questions:

How do I teach in the Urban Design course for which I am responsible? Why do I choose to teach in this particular way the Urban Design course I am describing?

The third issue concerns the Urban Design exercise(s) the students work on. It was considered useful to describe the general and special characteristics of the design theme(s) and the exercise(s) of the course, the criteria upon which this design theme is chosen, the way it is introduced to the students, the questions the exercise poses, the method whereby the teacher monitors the development of the exercise, the focal points of the exercise, the submission requirements, the evaluation of the exercise. The above descriptions were to be supported by references as to the way and the extent to which the choice of the exercise(s) ensures the fulfilment of the educational objectives of the course and allows for the best grasp of its overall philosophy by the students. These issues may be expressed in the following questions:

What exercise(s) and/or design themes do I run? Why do I suggest these exercises for the teaching of Urban Design?

The fourth point suggested was related to the difficulties encountered by the teacher in running the course. More specifically, the teacher was asked to offer an overview and a critical appreciation of the course with regard to its effectiveness and contribution to the overall school curriculum,

with suggestions as to how its quality might be improved. These issues may be expressed in the following questions:

How satisfied am I with the course of Urban Design I teach? How could I improve my course?

The Structure of the Volume

Twenty responses from urban design teachers from Schools of Architecture around Europe were received in this first step, and are presented in this volume. Their contributions are organised in three sections. The division was not based on similarities relating to perceptions of urban design or to the teaching practices applied: attempts to follow such a taxonomy led to a great number of sections and of cases difficult to compare, to blurred distinctions between them and to a new realization of the complexity and variety of approaches to urban design teaching. Rather, since the main objective of this volume was to record teaching practices in the subject area, it was organized on the basis of criteria related to the teaching process. More specifically, the criteria governing the organization of the volume were the characteristics of the course, as these derive from its position in the school curriculum (year of studies the course is taught, type of course, compulsory or optional, teaching hours dedicated to the course), and the characteristics of the recipient, that is, the class to which the course is addressed (level of experience in urban design, number of students, number of teaching staff, student/staff ratio). The interest is thus focused on the teaching itself, inviting the reader to investigate, through the strategies and methods described, the attestations, views and positions of teachers on the subject they teach.

The first part, entitled "beginnings", includes contributions on elementary courses, that is, introductory courses to urban design run in the third year of studies at the latest. This enables the reader to investigate the pedagogic strategies applied to give students their first acquaintance with the theoretical and practical issues of urban design. The logic of this classification is that these courses are addressed to students whose basic architectural education is just starting to take shape and whose experience and skills in relation to the management of a design project are relatively limited. The texts in this section were, in principle, classified according to the type of course, into courses that combine theory and studio, courses that focus on theory, and courses that focus primarily on studio. Another layer of classification was whether the course is compulsory – in other words if the course is considered basic in the school curriculum – or optional. Last but not least, another classification criterion was the number of teaching hours a school dedicates to its urban design course in relation to the whole.

The second part, entitled "advancements", includes case studies of courses that are addressed to students who are close to the completion of their studies in architecture. The courses are, therefore, more profound and delve into the teaching of urban design. The object of this classification is to present texts that describe how urban design is taught to students who have already acquired a relatively well-elaborated knowledge and conscience of spatial issues as well as the social, cultural and economic parameters that determine its form and organization. The texts in this section are classified along the same lines as those in the first part: that is, the type of course (theory, studio or both), whether compulsory or optional, and the percentage of teaching hours allocated to it.

The third part, entitled "integrations", includes texts that describe integrated courses covering urban design teaching in the overall school curriculum. These courses are either integrated postgraduate study courses or span the basic programme of the schools of architecture at which they are taught. Their presentation allows for an exploration of the ways in which urban design becomes the subject of a coordinated teaching programme within an overall school curriculum through a large number of teaching hours.

The present volume is a first attempt to elaborate the raw material that tackled issues related to urban design education. The ENHSA Thematic Network, and the Urban Design Sub-network in particular, are committed to the further development and the critical and constructive processing of this material and of new material to come from new initiatives, in order to provide a useful and functional tool for the advancement of urban design teaching in schools of architecture in Europe.