
FROM PERSONAL TO PUBLIC CLAIM: HOW CAN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION BE IMPORTANT FOR THE REST OF THE CAMPUS?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will discuss the teaching methods and the content of my class, titled 'Theories of Design of Space'. This elective course is taught in the 1st and 2nd year of the BA program of the newly established department of 'Culture, Creative Media, and Industries' of University of Thessaly. The BA program is designed to provide interdisciplinary training in subjects related to critical discussion of cultural production in contemporary environments. Most of the enrolled students have no background in arts or architecture, and a relatively poor 'cultural capital'. Because of this, traditional teacher-centred teaching results in significantly poorer educational outcomes; as discussed by Bourdieu (1979) appreciation of Architecture and art is subject to a broader 'personal taste', that is culturally and socially shaped. By implementing interactive learning strategies, such as dialogue on everyday architecture and common public space, an improvisation exercises, positive results and reactions have been recorded. In this paper, I provide an analysis of these methods which aim in creating conditions in which students can revise their previous understandings of architectural/public space concepts.

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Introduction

This is one of the questions asked to my first-year students at the beginning of the semester, when they first attend the ‘Theories of Space’s Design’ elective course. Their most common answers include: ‘learn how to decorate interior spaces’ or ‘to learn about the history of architecture’. Triggered by their answers, I frequently asked myself, *Why and how architectural education can be useful outside architectural schools?* What is so important about architecture, built environment and public space that could be of interest to 18 year old students with no desire to be professionals in the field?

The question asked to the students, has been difficult for me to answer. I am trained as an architect, completed a PhD on the Epistemology and History of Architecture, and my teaching was mostly to architectural school students who could relate the taught material with their future professional paths. As an educator, I was thrilled when in 2019 I was invited to teach in the newly established department of Culture, Creative media, and Industries in Volos; I wanted to contribute to the establishing of the first and only undergraduate program (till now) in Greece, that provides interdisciplinary training in ‘critical approaches to contemporary cultural production and the emerging creative industries’. The graduates of the department will have obtained both theoretical knowledge and hands-on skills on contemporary cultural production and cultural management.¹ They will learn to balance between theory and practice, being able to understand and produce for themselves within all types of cultural environment. While our wish is to see our skilled graduates having a fruitful career in the creative industries (museums, exhibitions, festivals, education, archives, libraries, etc), our encounter with the first-year bachelor students was worrisome. Most of my enrolled students have no theoretical background in arts or architecture and do not have the ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1979) that would allow them to appreciate architecture and build environment as significant factors of well-being. In this paper I discuss my personal trial-and- error story of teaching this course. I depict how introduction ‘of commons’ in the learning process, have both changed my relationship with the students and their relationship with knowledge.

A Trial-and-Error review

Why I kept failing.

During the first three years, I designed the syllabus of the course *Theories of Design’s Space* to be successively (per year) as such: a) Theory of Architecture b) History of Architecture c) History of the city of Volos. The first year was way too difficult for the non-architecture school students enrolled in my class. The second

and the third years (of what is basically an educational experiment) were admittedly more digestible to the students; albeit the necessity/importance with the educational context of the school was not understood. Basic things to architectural students, like the -undebatable to my eyes- aesthetics of seminal architectural works were not appealing or appreciated by them. All three years, I focused on the intentionality of the architects, instead of the processes of mediation and consumption of the architectural artefacts themselves.

What I was missing, is the fact that appreciation of architecture belongs to a 'broader personal taste', which is culturally and socially shaped (Bourdieu, 1979). Factoring in the severe financial crisis in Greece the last 10 years, this broader aesthetic taste has not been a priority for most people. Modern movements or eclectic ecclesiastic buildings were the object of admiration during my classes but were far away from the student's everyday encounters with public or private space. I had one of the highest enrolments rates every year, but a very low percentage of students who successfully pass the course; they gradually lost their interest and did not attend the class. To address this discouraging situation, I had to drastically revise my course.

David Gooblar (2022: 14) is radical on one point: 'Helping students learn requires us to create the conditions in which students can revise their previous understandings of the concepts and skills we're trying to help them acquire'. What were my student's previous conceptions of architecture, public space, and cities? How can these conceptions be revised and linked to their future professional careers? I had to meet my students and get to know them better.

Who are my students?

Last year, our department conducted an anonymous survey among our first-year student's personal background. The results of this were very informative. Our students are coming from Human and Social Sciences division of the secondary school, as well as the science of economics and information technology. Since our department was already running for four years, it was getting known amongst secondary school graduates. They have chosen it as their second choice, with their first choice being departments that either offer a more secure professional path (ex. education) or are closer to their interests (cinema, political science). Most of our freshmen finished their high school in Volos, or in near-by cities of Thessaly; the rest were coming from the two major Greek cities (Athens and Thessaloniki). This tendency became prevalent during the last ten years of economic crisis in Greece: A lot of families chose to send their children to nearby university departments, or to cities other than the expensive big cities of Greece. Many of my students have extra-curriculum interests (most of them of artistic nature like photography, music, dance and painting). Others, have specific career/work goals

that need specific professional skills (like learning computer programs or how to paint, or even organize/manage a professional project). The understanding of these various backgrounds and possible futures shed light to a missing part of the puzzle: what do all students share/have in common, that could be introduced to the curriculum? What is the link between them, that can play a significant role for their lives?

From personal to public claim: Creating a safe common space.

Taking into consideration all the above as well as the character of the department itself, I decided to completely revise my syllabus (for the 4th time!). The interactive teaching methods could not ‘magically’ erase the passivity of my students if the content of the class is irrelevant to their lives, present or future. The learning process should include a re-positioning of the students themselves in the society, and an acknowledgement of their (future) relationship to the production of space as far as the public ‘common space’ is shaped by powers beyond the architect’s intention. As future cultural workers, they will be part of the gentrification process in city centres, if not its starting point. Beautifully designed buildings spaces by famous architects, are cultural capital, obtaining of which drives people to symbolic cultural antagonism. By understanding the above, the aim of my class is to offer students the tools to acknowledge their place in this cultural industry.

For students to understand their role in the complex love-hate relationship between urban space, architecture, and commons in post capitalist era, I had to find teaching methods that transforms the class to a *safe common space*. The class should become a place to learn about the ‘world in common’ (Korsgaard, 2017:446) by utilizing the very essence of the common public space: discussion. In this safe space, students will learn how to discuss in such a complex world: How to organize an argument, evaluate intentioned public work, to defend ideas, or overthrow arguments. My pedagogical tools are dialogue and questionnaires. Pushing this educational experiment, a lit bit further, I initiated a theatrical improvisation of a semi-fictional situation regarding the use of public space. These methods have drastically changed the mood of the class.

Dialogue

Dialogue is commonly praised as one of the most efficient pedagogical tools. I always attach great importance to it; but now dialogue was taking a central role: the percentage of time spent on dialogue with my students, versus my lecture time is now almost double. Every course starts with an image related to the day’s subject and a question. It is important to know my student’s own pre-conception of the subject (right or wrong). Through several questions I aim to drive them to a

cognitive conflict. The entire class vividly participates, and sometimes verbal arguments between the students arise (which in fact are reproducing the social inequalities I was trying to highlight in my teachings). Often, I must intervene in setting limits and making this space safe, unjudgmental and stop the taking of sides. In the anonymous evaluation of my course at the end of the semester, this common space of dialogue was generally appreciated. (Eventhough there were three or four good students, that underline that the dialogue become prevalent part of the class and preferred more traditional teaching ways as the classical professor's lecturing). Dialogue in the architectural context, is the initiating and creative force behind all designed spaces. The build environment is produced after informed dialogue, the quality of which is of great importance to the result. Dialogue or just the exchange of opinions, even when if it supports the dominant view, is a tool of production of architectural space.

Questionnaires

Another way of challenging my student's preconceptions or views on the materials I teach is the anonymous online questionnaires. Below, I describe a typical question, the results of which shows how the student's cultural capital (and habitus) affects (without students even realizing) his/her aesthetic taste. The question is: *'The house of my dreams: if I had 1 million euros, how would your house look like?'* The most common answers were 'To have a functional house, with enough space for everyone' or 'To have a large bathroom to fit the washing machine'. So, despite their huge budget, their taste was still shaped by their social and cultural capital. Instead of teaching the class on Bourdieu's examples on the relationship between cultural capital and social class in French Society of 1950's given in his book *La distinction*, this questionnaire asked the students to analyze themselves and draw their own conclusions. Their habits in space were becoming important, but without been judged, and could be understood through a theoretical lens.

Theatrical Improvisation

Inspired by a method of theatre-making in which the script or performance originates from collaborative, often improvisatory work, I asked the students to play a role in a semi-fictional situation: in Athens city center, an investment company has bought two great, neoclassical buildings, restored them and transformed them into cultural centers. A nearby unbuilt plot is occupied by the neighborhood inhabitants transforming it into a common nature space for playing and resting. The development company wants to buy this last plot and use it as parking area for its newly erected cultural centers. The students, after reading scientific articles on the gentrification process of the area (Athens's city center), as well as newspaper debates on the subject, they chose their own characters in the play. Their choices, in a way, silently mirrored their future selves. They chose to be single mothers with children, one married father of two, an investment

company director, a successful artist, an interior designer, a real estate agent, a homeless person, and a university student (figure 1).

Three-hour discussions were held where students in their roles debated on the cons/pros of such transformation of the public space. My educational goal here, was to make them understand the complexity of the phenomenon of gentrification (this is not a black/white discussion) and give them the freedom to publicly express themselves without being judged. By being in someone else's shoes, they had the opportunity to freely express their views and fight either for their rights, monetary profits, and anything in-between. I was there to rephrase questions, challenge their opinions, but also laugh with them when there were spectacular in playing their roles! Gradually, I saw their views changing, as becoming less rigid or single-minded than they were in the beginning of the exercise. They learned to build their argumentation. It was very interesting to hear their fears, and perceptions of Greek Society or their own future in it. An edited version of this three-hour collective production can be found online in the endnotes.² This play was a way of teaching the importance of the public space, but also on how to produce it via dialogue. It reproduces situations existing on the real word in the classroom, in a more than a theoretical way.



Figure 1. Still frame from the theatrical improvisation. Copyright of the author, 2023.

Conclusions: Becoming an inhabitant of the commons

During my short experience in teaching the production of architecture and public space to non-architects, I realized that general inequalities amongst students cannot be eliminated or even reduced with traditional teaching methods. Few of my students had previous knowledge of how public space is produced and why this is crucial to their well-being. So, I should not only have catered about the subject of the class. I should have realized that most of my students were also missing the tools to get access to knowledge, or at least challenge this non-access to knowledge. By introducing to them the framework of dialogue about commons, as it happens in the public space, I was also forming a very specific social condition, described by De Lissovoy as: ‘a space of interrelation, collaboration, and entanglement, which sets the parameters for any meaningful global community, that I call here the common, and it is the form of education which sets its sights on the development and democratization of this condition, that I call pedagogy in common’ (De Lissovoy, 2011 in Korsgaard, 2018: 450). The foundation of this community inside the class, will shape future inhabitants of the common, turning personal claims to public.

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¹<https://cult.uth.gr/en/departement-en/> Visited in 18/10/2023

²An edited form of the theatrical improvisation could be found here: <https://www.veed.io/view/71c4f2da-05da-43bd-ae00-a4d85466b9b3?panel=share> Visited in 18/10/2023.