

IT'S ALWAYS A THREESOME, OR, ON THE INTRICACIES OF EDUCATING AN ARCHITECT

Costandis Kizis, Teresa Stoppani and Armando J. Uhia Hernandez

In 2016/17 Costandis Kizis and Teresa Stoppani were Armando Uhia Hernandez's teachers at the Leeds School of Architecture, in the first year of the Bachelor of Architecture (with Honours) programme, the first three years of undergraduate architectural education in the United Kingdom. Costandis was both the design studio tutor and a history and theory lecturer. Teresa lectured in a history and theory and often visited the studio. Yet – who put things together, in a wholesome architectural education process? Who taught, and who learned?

This year Armando continues his successful career of Student Architect at the Leeds School of Architecture. Costandis is Studio Master and History and Theory Lecturer at the Architectural Association in London. Teresa is Professor of Research in Architecture at London South Bank University, where she co- teaches an undergraduate Architectural Design Studio and a Cultural Context lecture course.

Conversations continue.

If this were a play it would start with casting the characters: A meets C meets T. But that would be too easy. This floorplan does not have a legend. It is not even a plan, perhaps it is a map. Memory, temporality, cultural curiosity, navigational imprints are already at stake, before we even sharpen a pencil, or start talking. It's a conversation.

This story gets personal, very. As do design tutorials in the studio, where the unconscious is exposed, as if we were, all, on the psychoanalyst coach. For decency, deontology or mere shyness we pretend not to notice. It is a tacit agreement, the pact that binds minds who want to think together, design together, and grow together. Forget sex. Nothing is more intimate than thinking in tune. [T]

October:

In the design studio we give you a brief and erroneously ask you to be creative. Creative?

To be continued. [T]

December:

A beach house in Fuerteventura, one that would be looking towards the sunset among the trees. That's what Armando dreams of. He even posts a picture of a house like that next to his studio desk. Yet the brief is about a temporary structure for Leeds city centre. Armando designs a hanging box over a set of ducts and pipes, and keeps thinking about the beach. In the box one supposedly would find the peaceful environment that he dreams of in the beach house. The result is a horrible design; at the assessment, the project barely passes. There is no relation between the story he tells the jury panel and the design he is presenting. A total disaster.

Nevertheless, the jurors are impressed by the way he talks; the passionate tone and the coherent argument, albeit in front of an incoherent design. The easy assumption is that this is yet another student who's "bullshitting", that is, talk over a project he never produced. Yet, two days before Armando had

asked the question “what is an architectural narrative?”, and no matter what we told him, it was now obvious that he was more capable of developing a narrative rather than a project. [C]

February:

‘Students amazed by you. Did you dance for them??? Armando almost in love.’ [C] [email]

March:

Armando’s dream and his narrative become architectural concern. In an email he writes: ‘There is something missing in today’s educational system and that is the active respectful relationship from the Master [read, tutor] to the Apprentice [read, student]. [Lacking] The benefits of having so is what is stopping some students to develop their maximum potential, and that is sad. The lack of this relationship is the lack of passion in the Master [tutor] and the lack of appreciation and respect from the Apprentice [student]. There are two reason why I am mentioning this: [...] During these times you inspire[d me] to be better, to push my own boundaries and to develop new 'hybrid' ways of thinking with my projects and daily architectural life. [...] I intend to pursue for you passion, education and respect. Both of you are a key part of my future success within Architecture and everything that revolves around it.’ [A]

February-April:

Lectures on Postmodern and Modern architecture. Reverse order of a “mission impossible” survey course, from Hadid to Hammurabi in 12 lectures. It makes sense for the first year of architectural studies to start with the “hot stuff” - it helps in studio! Postmodern and Modern were supposed to be the “easy” lectures. It turns out it was a nightmare. There wouldn't be two continuous minutes of talking without an interruption by Armando, ranging from surprisingly interesting questions to spontaneous comments such as “I don’t like this guy” (the “guy” being Le Corbusier). It seems impossible to strike a balance between welcoming one of his comments and making a point in the lecture, and asking him to calm down. At some point, already exhausted, I come to 1929, the Barcelona Pavilion is projected on the screen. Next image, Mies’s wonderful collage of it. I move to the next slide and there he goes again: “Hey! Can you go back?” He said nothing more, we all just looked at the image for another minute. [C]

April:

‘I would like to take the opportunity to ask you something [...] In one of the surgeries you said the word ‘creating’ was banned in architecture, but why? I have been thinking of this a lot.’ [A] [email]

Now Armando is standing in front of his desk in the studio, wearing a white apron and slicing a pile of wet clay with a big knife. He looks like a butcher when cutting meat. He is complaining about the material being heavy and not as malleable. Thin fillets of clay are laid out on the side of the desk, and when you ask him what he’s doing he says “I don’t know!!!” and bursts out laughing.

He doesn't want to say he’s creating; that word was recently banned, so he just cuts clay fillets; as accurately as a good butcher, yet equally purposelessly.

On the next day, in the studio he presents a “conceptual model”. He makes no sense when talking about it, but the actual model is the best piece he’s produced so far. A sort of organic terrain made of clay, of almost sculptural quality, intersected by sheer, perfectly cut wooden surfaces, free-standing walls that penetrate and mark the clay. Key moment: Armando talks less and does more. [C]

For the Cultural Context Studies course, Armando writes an essay entitled 'Architecture in the Hands of the Incapable'. It is a polemical paper that 'explores the impact of globalisation, industrialisation and consumerism not only on architecture but on the architect', and reminds us 'of the importance of architecture and the effects it has on the context and the world in which architecture is applied'. The concerns and discoveries of one year of experimentation and questioning in the design studio transpire in the essay as well. [T/A]

'If one desires to research creation in architecture, it is totally inevitable that it would be like trying to play with clay without dirtying one's hands. The overflow of ideas and revelations will compel an honest architect to an immediate sketch or any experimental model making, in order to begin with the eternal passion (always ambivalent) of translating one's project into the palpable world.' Ultimately, the question/obsession remains, as the essay suggests 'that every architect, at least once a year should ask him/herself the following questions: To what extent are we allowing to control our creativity? To what extent are we allowing our surroundings to control our shape, form or function? What are we afraid of? What is stopping/constraining our vision?'. [A]

May:

The studio brief is about a double programme, of the student's choice. Quite ambitiously (especially for the square footage provided) Armando is designing a Parliament building and an Opera house. It took us some time to convince him that - size wise - it was more of a local council room and a busker's stand ... but isn't the programmatic premise almost the same?

All of a sudden, everything is put together. An argument about collectivity and participation paired with a sensitive narrative about governing and enjoying. A malleable terrain, divided by water and vegetation, reminiscent of his Fuerteventura dream house ambient, mingling with a strict layout of straight walls that defines the double programme. A design process that owed as much to Armando's butcher-like making experiments, as to his experimentation with collage techniques inspired by those of Mies van der Rohe discovered in the history and theory lectures. An eloquent presentation leaves the jurors breathless, as Armando goes through the pinned-up drawings that occupy half the room. [C]

'Just read Armando's [essay] and I'm actually IMPRESSED!!! Not any more by his passion, but by his progress ... and this comes after good work in studio, where he jumped from D (last semester) to B!!! It's so nice to see that one's work does not go to waste ... I mean, I felt so many times in this school that our teaching has no impact, and then you've got this guy and some more ... For this guy in particular, your impact was beyond expectation, both in his essay and in general; you have woken him up!' [C] [email]

October.

Armando send us images of his work to accompany these words, and writes: 'I am still not only in love but madly in love with architecture. It's the suffering I enjoy the most. ... I deeply miss you [...] Not only your teaching, but your friendship and those conversations that sparked my creativity.' [A]

Did we really ask you to be creative? [T/C]

Note: Armando, Costandis and Teresa worked together in the first year of the BA (Hons) Architecture Course at the Leeds School of Architecture, Leeds Beckett University, United Kingdom, 2016/17. Year Theme 2016/17: 'Temporary Narratives'. Studio tutors: Ashley Ball, Mohamad Hafeda (year coordinator), Costandis Kizis, Francesco Zuddas. History and Theory lecturers: Costandis Kizis and Teresa Stoppani.

FIGURES

0.A

Year 1 Project 1. Orthographic projection, photography, photocopy, collage and model making are used as media for speculating on the expansion of abandoned everyday objects. Studio director: Mohamad Hafeda. Student: Joseph Sudlow.

0.B

Year 1 Project 2. Exploring the physical and social fabric of public pockets in the city centre of Leeds. New 'break spaces' interrupt current practices of public space and introduce new activities and dynamics. Studio director: Mohamad Hafeda. Student: Shaan Singh.

0.C

Year 1 Project 3. Proposing double public programmes for the market's outdoor space that go beyond selling and buying and explore the meaning of exchange in relation to site, programme and form. Studio director: Mohamad Hafeda. Student: Ryan John Garganta.

0.D

Year 1 Project 3. Studio director: Mohamad Hafeda. Student: Nur Isa.

1.

Armando J. Uhia Hernandez. From oral to written. Opening narrative for the First Year Studio final project 'Flowing Boundaries'.

2.

Armando J. Uhia Hernandez. Before form-making. The basic elements and materials of the proposal in a Mies-inspired collage.

3.

Armando J. Uhia Hernandez. 'Flowing Boundaries'. Intuitive model of clay and wood; first material exploration.

4.

Armando J. Uhia Hernandez. 'Flowing Boundaries'. The plan; performance and discursive space in a simple double-programme layout.

5.

Armando J. Uhia Hernandez. Function and texture; the design for a wall that would host different activities of a break space.

6-7-8.

Armando J. Uria Hernandez. 'Flowing Boundaries'. Model views.