

Transcultures and Communities: exercises to validate and design a set of tales on migrations

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Literary studies' main object of study is the dynamics and devices involved in textual stories. Traditionally, architecture studies design spaces for experiences. It corresponds to sociology studies to reveal the interrelations between humans and their environment. Finally, geopolitical studies classically focus on political powers linked to the geographical space. In this context, this paper presents a multidisciplinary set of exercises that took place during the first semester of the academic year 2018/19, in which these four disciplines shared objectives and methods in relation with a common topic: migrations in the mid-20th Century. These exercises are based on literary narratives and non-literary texts about migration, border-crossing and transcultural identities compiled in the volume *Journeys. How travelling fruit, ideas and buildings rearrange our environment* (published by the Canadian Centre for Architecture in 2010), acknowledging the value of non-human migrants through topics and stories by establishing complex connections between them. The work presented in this paper describes how students are capable of implementing procedures learnt from other fields of knowledge (e.g. such as storyboards, sociograms or image tagging) for developing a traditional architectural design project.

The educational challenge is presented by the definition of methodologies and the identification of statements. The research developed in this contribution focuses on different degrees of integration and rootedness of modern migrations caused by climatic, cultural, labour or economic reasons. Is it a suitable topic for the four disciplines involved? It certainly provides an opportunity to speculate with non-humans, goods and knowledge beyond anthropocentric discourse. In particular, the subject allows us to compare migrants and remittances i.e. non-monetary transfers such as consumer goods, customs and technologies.

Introduction

The Canadian Centre for Architecture has been developing curatorial exhibitions about contemporary subjects suitable for architectural education, especially when this education is concerned on revealing convergences with other branches of sciences belonging to social sciences or humanities. These exhibitions are used as theoretical backgrounds to select inquiries and methods for regular courses at the Design Units in Architecture and Urbanism at the University of Alicante.

Specifically, "*Journeys. How travelling fruit, ideas and buildings rearrange our environment*" became the starting point for the workshop that is described in this paper. The stories that appear for each topic in *Journeys...* included questions about regulations, communal migrations and how these can affect configurations of homes and neighborhoods (Borasi, 2010 a): Some of the goals considered relevant for the fulfillment of the transdisciplinary experience were the

regulations and borders that effect change in how we understand a landscape; how movements of communities impact the configuration of buildings, towns and cities.

Which prints of neighborhoods and symbols of communal migrant identity are comparable with global ones such as Red Square in Moscow, the Eiffel Tower or Niagara Falls? Can a tobacco shop, a bazaar, a hospital waiting room or a Labor Exchange (examples of spaces in which tales of “Journeys...” take place) generate some degree of social adhesion on a micro scale? Can these be described by literary fictions, visualized by sociograms, amplified by architectural designs? These were the challenges that students had to deal with.

Certain tools were used to tag the identity and spaces of migrant communities. But, what does “tag” mean for architecture, philology or urban sociology? Is it a useful method for us to grasp the nature of knowledge-construction? Is it related to metadata, and so is that the reason why we need to consider a kind of keyword all the time? The answer would emerge while tackling the cooperative exercises set for the students.

Theory

Onghena (2008) proposes transculturality as a new kind of framework in which students and professors from Social Sciences, Humanities and Architecture share discussions and taxonomies while observing the way migrant communities disassemble and hybridize their cultures through a set of narratives on migrations. In this context, the definition of transculturality proposed by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1987) explores the hybrid identity of Cuban culture, in which elements coming from different traditions (Africa, Europe and native American people) coalesce into a cultural fusion whose elements are different and anew in comparison to metropolitan and original traditions. The prefix *trans-* makes reference to the *transformation* of these elements into something anew. After this critical reading, they are asked to apply this critical frame into the tales included in *Journeys*.

As non-representational methodologies propose, each human or non-human agency has its own value. Dealing with the ecology of migrations, those can be discussed through graphics and models as if they were, in essence, central to group conversation practices among diverse fields of knowledge (Vannini 2015) (see figures 03 a-c).

It is a matter of fact that the shape of a city, a neighbourhood or a house is constituted throughout centuries by overlapping layers made by the aspirations of their dwellers and the intuition of their leaders. In spite of that, they have been studied during decades as stable and lasting entities which did not undergo changes. However, some Social Sciences’ fields consider the study of different elements in relation with mobility and transition through spaces and how they contribute to the anthropization of territories. These moving matters are people, materials, taxonomies, equipments, cultural practices, what has been denominated “circulating entities” (Guggenheim y Soderstrom, 2009). These entities occasionally flourish and strengthen, and are assumed by local regulations as new typology, like in the case of Bengali bunqalow (King 1995 and Howes 2010); whereas others do not consolidate, like the example of a hospital or other forms of health facilities, being transferred from a specific sociocultural context to a different one. Even massive imaginary elements of social networks can be considered migrant or transiting categories, and actually they have been denominated “mediascape” or “imagescapes” (Appadurai 1996).

For architectural purposes, there is an interesting debate regarding what is the migrant object: a building or a typology, understood as the form into which a social practice crystallizes in order

to enable, for example, the living of a nuclear family, or the reclusion of individuals to be punished, or the gathering of people who need to pray.

Methods

After reading the narratives, the students (twenty working groups in total, one presented in this paper) create models (see figures 02 and 03) showing the social and psychological qualities of these stories' characters, with typological considerations that could include not only the formal framework of communal spaces but also the actions by which their identity or social values are recognized.

Later on, the students perform a tagging activity through the tool ImageTagger, a software to analyze and compare the social and spatial values of pictures taken from the social network Instagram, querying the cities and spaces included in the narratives (San Juan de Yapacani, Arnold's Cove, Brazzaville, Mazzara, Dakar, Barre, among others) (see figure 04). This software creates a string-based data frame in which metadata are associated with each picture, tagging the interpretation of the content manually. Tags were based on a pre-defined matrix of parameters and values, and parameters could be associated with a value of choice (e.g. parameter 'migrant', value 'seed'). The software recorded the choice of value to be associated with each parameter and linked all parameters and values to the picture to which they referred (see figure 05). In a subsequent step, parameters and values (tags) would be merged with each picture's metadata.

Both exercises can be identified in the intersection between social sciences, computer science, and urban studies (Döring, Reif and Poeschl, 2016; Cheng et al. 2011). More specifically, within the study of urban space, López Baeza et al. (2016) analyze individual assessments and common perceptions of a newly remodeled street through Instagram pictures. The results could subsequently be transferred onto maps and urban proposals, such as those defined by SpinUnit Research Group for several Baltic cities: Baltigram is a comparative study of pictures taken in different urban fabrics –city center, single-family residences, and post-soviet social housing – concluding with a correspondence between morphology, behavioral patterns and representational trends (Cerrone, 2016).

At the last stage of the learning experience, all materials (models, sociological diagrams, results from labeling activity) are discussed to establish the proper definition of statements for conclusive design solutions (see figure 02d), in this case consisting in equipments for the university of Alicante, tributes to the transculture values learned from the Canadian tales (see figure 07 for understanding chronological stages).

Results

Most of the narratives selected for this research include transcultural elements that are transformed during the migration process. To portray this idea, the rice Japanese-born Bolivians grow and harvest in San Juan de Yapacani is a central element of Japanese diet and culture, but it has evolved and acquired new cultural aspects in its new land. *“Experimentation is how a culture of innovation flourishes when transplanted: in the 1950s Japanese migrants formed new communities in Bolivia, where a revolution and agrarian reform had opened vast new tracts of land for farming. The tradition of experimental agriculture brought by the new inhabitants transformed the landscape, both by the introduction of new crops and through imported techniques, such as wet-rice farming”* (Borasi 2010 a). In the writer's narrative exhibited at the CCA, the storyteller is absent, and only the dialogues of some of those who attended an informal

dinner emerge (Amemiya, 2010); the chapter titles match the names of crops (rice, soy, fruit) that are mentioned during the conversation. Guests at the dinner, experts in Japanese crop imports in Bolivia, discuss how crops have been adapted to Bolivian lands, which is a clear example of transculturation of elements coming from Japan and acquiring new qualities in their new land. Following this starting point, the storyboard created by the students became an audio-visual strategy to connect the original story with the design project that addressed part of an existing infrastructure in the University of Alicante: *“It takes place at sunset in the orchard of a neighborhood in the Bolivian landscape where rice grows; nearby some people are chatting casually; it is a National holiday; the camera enters a room where the protagonists of the scene talk about traditional recipes”* (excerpt from Adrian Bernad’ script, student).

The design stage developed several meeting spaces to continue with a kind of progression plan for the community, including a facility with an area specialized in Bolivian-Japanese food, spaces for orchards and for celebrations (such as Bon Odori or National Rice Day to commemorate the arrival of the Japanese after the Second World War). Some efforts were orientated to design new uses overlapped to an existing infrastructure: in relation with this, design included the minimum steps to understand the a cyclic program: nurturing, transporting, storing, consuming and celebrating. Also, design produced by the student considered Japanese constructive techniques like dry construction or tightened clothes (see figure 02 e).

Another example can be found in the story *“Compromise in the Casbah: How the residents of a Sicilian town navigate several languages and many different ideas about how to use space”*. It revolves around the life of Tunisian immigrants in Sicily, an island where Islamic culture was present during the Middle Age (Borasi 2010 b). The Tunisian protagonist is able to recognize elements coming from this background, especially in the design of the neighborhood where he and his family is living, and also in the fishing culture. However, these elements have undergone a process of transformation due to the Christian presence on the island from that time, and the resulting elements are *transcultured*, having features coming from different Mediterranean traditions. One of the most relevant transcultural elements in the tale are backyards in houses, which are spaces shared by neighbors of different nationalities, and which are typically found in traditional north-African towns. They become the crystallization of the coalescence of cultures and their evolution throughout history in a specific communal space. The students in Alicante decided to model one of this yards by means of cardboard surfaces. In order to do that, they gained information from Google Maps and selected a representative yard. Afterwards different characters (people, equipment, pets...) were added. All these elements were used in a debate about tagging where new issues arouse, such as the involuntary character of migration, the visual connection between private spaces and shared spaces without in-between corridors, or the reason for the social mediation experience included in the tale (see figure 03).

Thanks to Ortiz’s criticism, it is desirable to set the focus in these transformed elements when studying cultures having a hybrid background. It is necessary to say that today, in contemporary global conditions, hybridism is a prevailing phenomenon all over the world, and that makes Ortiz’s approach on the study of transculturalism a fruitful methodology to understand current societies.

After reading Ortiz’s methodology, students coming from philology have learnt how to analyze hybrid cultures in order to find elements coming from alien traditions and, what is more important, to observe and criticize their evolution in this transition process from one cultural space to another. Since they have been separated into groups working with different tales, they

learn from very different contemporary situations that have an impact in this literature and contain meaningful material to study hybridization today.

Apart from this focus on transcultural elements, the project we undertake has other *trans*-features that enrich its possibilities as well. The fact that philologists have to collaborate with students coming from different degrees provide them with the urge to *transpose* the conclusions drawn after analyzing hybridization to the architectural projects under development in the classroom. These transdisciplinary conditions make them think how to convert into space and architecture the temporal processes they have studied when they accessed to the history of these emigrated elements. In other words, a translation of temporal elements into spatial ones is performed. This transversal criticism is also shared with sociologists and students of geopolitics, which need to understand how contemporary societies are configured on a hybrid ground resulting from long process of travelling, immigrating, international commerce and exchange, exile and deportation. It is essential for criticism today to understand and respect the different identity features that coalesce in contemporary cultures, and Ortiz's criticism is a great antidote against the increasing nationalistic attitudes gaining importance nowadays, given that it sheds light on the cross-cultural origin of every cultural phenomena, and questions the fictitious homogeneity that nationalisms seeks to establish by means of reducing the presence of cultures who are understood as alien in grounds to which they have immigrated. Transcultural approaches allow the students to realize the artificiality of many of these prevailing nationalistic discourses.

Finally, working on Ortiz's criticism on transculturality provides the students with an enriching vision of their fields, since they find revealing connections between disciplines thanks to the *transdisciplinary* contents they can exchange with other degrees.

All diagrams and designs were uploaded onto a website in order to *taxonomize* the collective production again. This resource (<http://migrantmatters.orsieg.es/>, see #13 and #15 for materials corresponding to included in this paper) displays three vertical strips: a description of students' statements (left); the model and diagram interface (center); and the final set of tags (right). Each work uses an icon extracted from the original source "Journeys..." drawn by Erika Beyer for the CCA, as a way to recognize the key data for the whole production (see figure 06).

Discussion and Conclusion

It appears that each group of students continued with the scripts initiated by each author included in Giovanna Borasi's exhibition for the Canadian Centre for Architecture, for each example of an impact of transnational migrations of people, objects and animals.

With the tagging approach, students could explore the contribution of low culture (popular, everyday life culture) and sacred spaces to enhance a sense of belonging to communities and how national identity is represented, performed, *spatialized* and materialized (Edensor 2002 and 2015); other students discussed how cultural geography and theory examine tourism and its self-representational dimension, revealing paradoxical ways to understand both mobile and rooted, real and fake, spaces (Minca 2006).

The use of iconic images and pictures is studied by anthropologists and artists, while philologists focus their attention on literary language, which is commonly embodied by written (or oral) texts, but never images without linguistic texts. However, this learning experience proved that certain bridges could be established between contexts in which literary texts are produced and their historical backgrounds, which could include any kind of image (artistic and non-artistic

pictures) and any historical material as well, such as non-literary texts, videos, film, painting or sculpture. Following this argument, students performed bridges with creative and visual methods. These bridges have a twofold nature: their transcultural value, since they allow the transition of elements coming from different traditions to form hybrid identities which are commonplace today, and the enrichment that transdisciplinary activity provides to the students.

Besides the evident socio-demographic segmentation of Instagram users, the study on subjectivity relied greatly on interpretation, which by definition also has a subjective component. Following this advice, final bar-charts serve to inform about possible controversies that can lead to other levels of decision or analysis. In the case of San Juan de Yapacani, Instagram images informed about cause-effect relationships between certain remoteness in the migratory movement, an almost non-existent social segregation and a strong feeling of place attachment. Links between these concepts are highlighted with dashed lines in Figure 5, and are referred to questions 7, 8 and 11 of the tagger activity. Other questions included in the tagger activity provide a way to find out which agent migrates, not just humans. Some answers propose "hability", "technology", "typology" or "seed" (Figure 4). In relation with San Juan study case, "seed" stands out in a double value to that granted to the "human" migrant. Answers demonstrate greater preeminence to the translocation of seeds and the consequent hybridization of recipes than to the migration of humans (the value in the answers is double, see bar-chart "cities by migrant" in figure 5). These Instagram backgrounds that can be analyzed in terms of pride, curiosity, happiness, identity, character... and constitute a useful source of documentation and decision for urban and architectural design processes.

Giovanna Borasi decided to compile fictions written by different authors, commissioned by the Canadian Centre for Architecture ten years ago, and now students at the University of Alicante have integrated those narratives and topics (negotiation, value, typology, etc.) into new sets of design projects and categories. The relevant conclusion is that through the stories included in the CCA exhibition, through the ones reformulated by the architectural proposals and through the sets of Instagram images analyzed, the students realized that mobilities are multiple: migrations, exile, movement of goods and food, virtual trips (in real time, transcending geographic and social distance, and forming multiple communities remotely) (Urri, 2011, 15).

This work on migrant cultures and transculturality remains open to new research opportunities and to be contrasted from other perspectives. At least it has helped to question hegemonic metaphors such as "social order", "structure", and "land" by means of a new range of categories more in line with the transit of today's multicultural society: "networks" and "flows" highlight that all study must be able to articulate the mobility of humans with those established by the matters that make them possible, moving beyond humanistic or anthropocentric discourse.

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Figure 01: "Journeys..." Exhibition at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2010. (<https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/events/3053/journeys-how-travelling-fruit-ideas-and-buildings-rearrange-our-environment>).



Figure 02: underlying & graphic approach (a); scaled model corresponding to spatial interpretation of the text (b); storyboard for a new script (c); tagging activity (d); project proposal (e) (design and production work led by student Adrian Bernad Almarío).

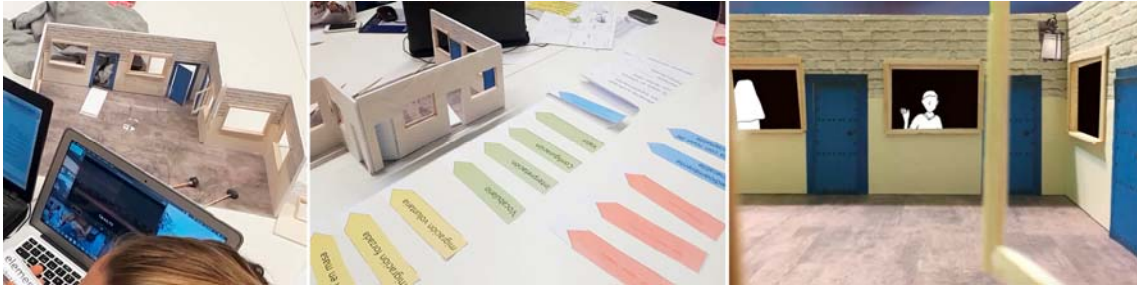


Figure 03: typical mediterranean courtyard at Mazzara del Vaio (Sicilia, Italy). Model to express social relations between spaces, corresponding to one of CCA tales (Borasi 2010 b) (design and production work led by student Estibaliz Herranz).

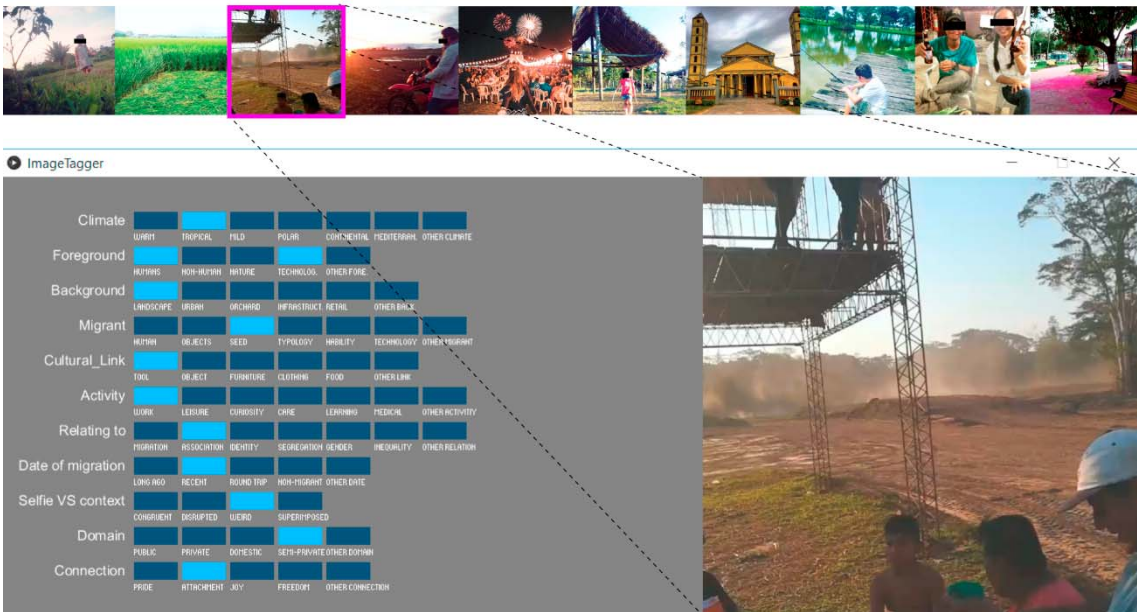


Figure 04: ImageTagger with migrant & cultural parameters, analyzing San Juan de Yapacani's set of Instagram images. (tool developed by research network Spinunit.eu)

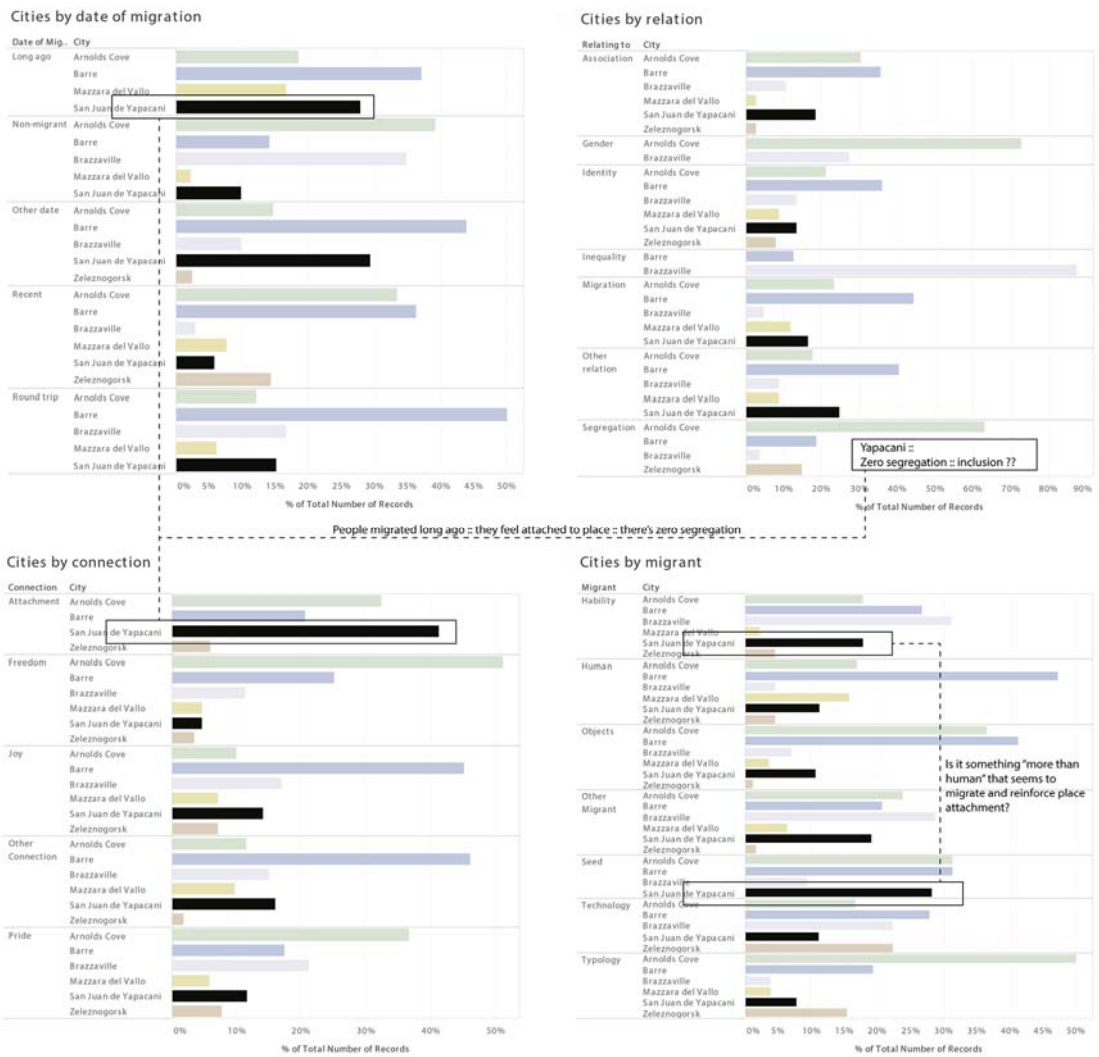


Figure 05: partial results and discussion notes. San Juan de Yapacani highlighted in black. (Graphic by authors).



Figure 06: website with all collaborative production (<http://migrantmatters.orsieg.es/>) (tool developed by Sergi Hernandez Carretero). See #13 and #15 for materials corresponding to the study cases included in this paper.

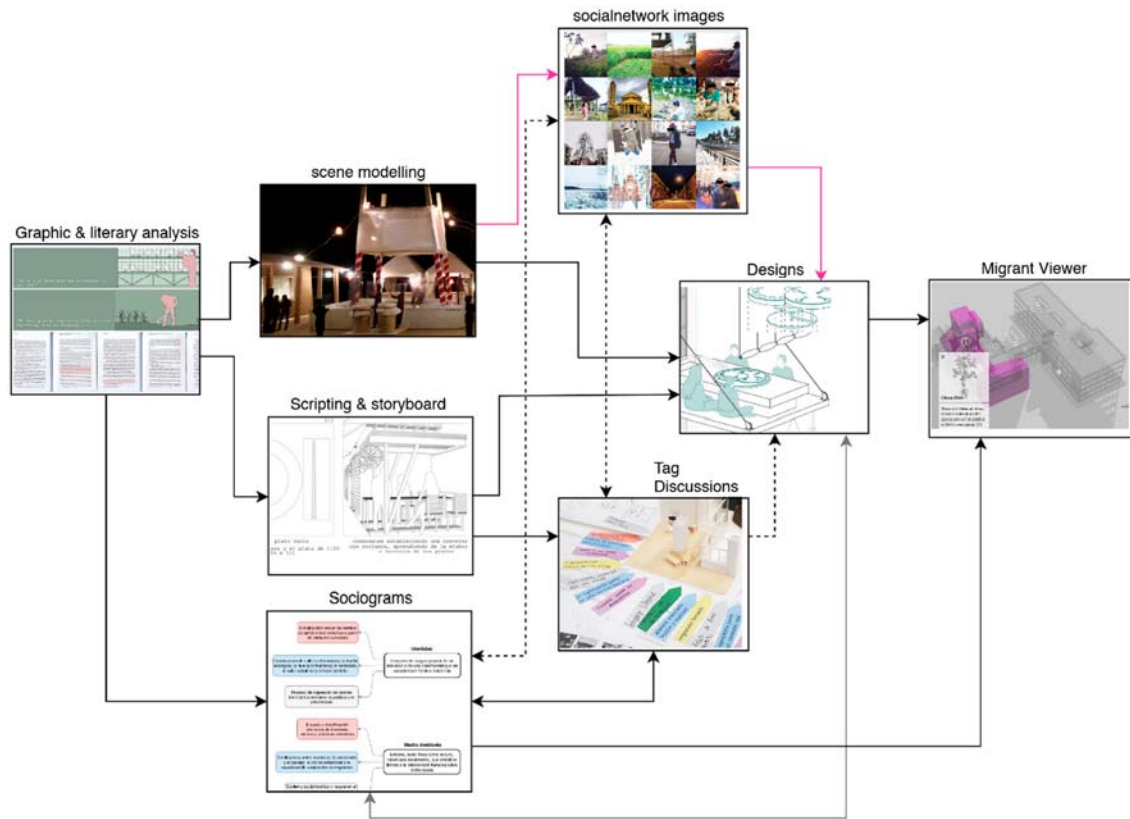


Figure 07: diagram containing all stages and two selected methods for this paper (scene modelling and socialnetwork tagger). (Chronology from left to right, graphic by authors).