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La Place Tropical – Action for Collaborative Creation

Is there space for improvisation within the usual strict protocols of architectural and urban design pedagogies?

This question was central to our collaborative efforts in the Architecture School of Commons program (ASOC)..

To frame this process of non-formal education, we must view the architecture curriculum as an open framework that embraces unexpected circumstances and diverse perspectives. This approach aligns with the idea of "ad hocism" in architecture and design, which emphasizes improvisation and the flexible use of available resources to solve specific problems.

Ad hocism, derived from the Latin *ad hoc* ("for this"), refers to temporary, inventive, and often unconventional solutions. Explored by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver in their book *Ad hocism: The Case for Improvisation*, this concept critiques traditional design, which often favors rigid solutions. In ad hocism, flexibility, creativity, and incompleteness are viewed as strengths, promoting a more democratic and accessible approach to design, both in architecture schools and practice. This method is increasingly valued in architectural education, encouraging students to pursue innovative solutions free from conventional constraints.

Our collaborative work in ASOC began at Place Des Possibles in France in 2022, and since then, we have focused on improvisation and fostered a collaborative mindset. As guides in this initial research stage, we proposed a flexible working model based on improvisation. We organized small activities and events during residency weeks to engage students, teachers, and the local community at Place Des Possibles in the form of "Hors le Mur" in the middle of the village, whereas the week mostly took place in the building of La Place des possible itself. The flexible nature of these events allowed us to adapt to various circumstances using readily available materials and resources.

Despite their temporary nature, these activities provided valuable opportunities for reflection, sharing and debate about our practical experiences during the residency, as well as collective food for thought afterward.

For instance, we shared personal experiences during the first episode of ASOC, including the ongoing "Casa di BelMondo" project in Calabria. This project highlighted the importance of being responsive to unexpected resources that emerge during construction. This idea is captured in the title "Cantiere Domestico" we used the year after during the Italian cycle, where social and material elements intertwine, promoting a fresh approach to spatial design. A tangible example of creating collaborative spaces that prioritize adaptability over strict rules, this model emphasizes simple, hands-on creation for collective use. In Saint Laurent-en-Royans, through our idea of "Place Tropical", we established a hybrid space that challenges traditional notions of public and private areas, serving as a platform for relational, educational, and social activities.

Our first action in Saint Laurent-en-Royans was the event "La Pizza Fritta," a spontaneous community celebration held in the village square. For this dynamic event, we utilized existing structures and designed functional items through upcycling, using materials from La Place de Possibles and scrap resources from the village's productive activities, such as disposable beer kegs from a local craft brewery. We created a lamp, a

banner, tables, and benches for all collective events, adapting our designs to the environment. During the event in the square, we also created a collective ground drawing to capture the festive atmosphere, inviting both the community and visitors to come together for public events and discussions.

Reflecting on these activities is essential, and with this text, I aim to turn our reflections into something reusable, shareable, and expandable. I believe that artistic residencies primarily serve as relational incubators, facilitating social interactions and meaningful relationships, even if their outcomes aren't always definitive from a research perspective, creating the foundations for new collaborations, systems of growth, and collective trust.

If, in practice, your experience helps you to react by unconsciously anticipating possible ad hoc solutions, how can we clarify this pedagogical approach for teachers and students?

To do so, we need to dive deeper into investigating the relationship between teaching and learning methodologies, the balance between structured programs and spontaneity, and the connection between institutions and practice.

In 2024, for the third year, we went to Morphi after France and Italy. There, we envisioned a new space to collectively practice improvisation in public space design. This project was part of the initial process of activating a civic center for the village and was intended to evolve in both design and usage (incomplete but constantly evolving), focusing on the concept of the Fresh Playground, which signifies renewal and spontaneity in spatial design approach.

A few simple, shared rules among the design and build team govern the use and construction of tools for creating a flexible playground that is not bound by rigid regulations, allowing play to merge with action in space. Collective activities will shape the area, with play expressed through drawings on the ground, based on common rules and rituals that remain open to interpretation.

To make this possible, we built clever tools out of wood that allowed us to paint directly on the former playground of the school, drawing new lines in an unusual and improvised pattern. This process transformed the space into a dynamic canvas, inviting people to explore and interact with the reimagined environment in unexpected ways.

Therefore, this project is designed to evolve further in time learning through potential use.

Is this maybe a strategy to use for a collaborative design approach at the architecture school?

I believe "La Place Tropical" encapsulates our common ideas on practice and unending process of learning and teaching, reflecting on collaborative design approaches and new forms of collective pedagogy. Inspired also by the example by the Peripatetic school of ancient Greece, we philosophized during excursions around villages, contemplating abstract shapes and exploring our unconscious ability to assign meaning to them, much like our collective design processes does. This self and collective exploration led me to the term Pareidolia, a phenomenon where the mind interprets random stimuli as recognizable patterns. This concept stimulates our creative subconscious and fosters collaboration beyond artistic boundaries. I believe this process is foundational, nurturing unintentional synergies among individuals seeking connections on a shared imaginative basis. Furthermore, it encourages improvisation, allowing for spontaneous creativity that enriches the collaborative experience.

Discussions during our nature walks were open and dynamic, offering profound insights. The very first moment of "La Place Tropical" took place alongside a riverside venue in France, where we hosted our inaugural event to explore collective practices and potential pedagogical approaches in architecture schools.

Therefore, a fundamental principle is that collaboration and collective growth start with acknowledging personal differences and adapting these differences within the creative process. This involves recognizing the need for ad hoc solutions tailored to specific, temporary needs rather than relying on a single, formal solution that fits all contexts. The development of both individuals and collectives requires personal commitment, highlighting the institution's vital role in this process. By fostering a more fluid and less

hierarchical system of learning and teaching, institutions can move beyond the rigid structures traditionally found in architecture schools.

Thus, an updated view of pedagogies in architecture schools would greatly benefit future generations of architects engaged in social contexts and the construction of public spaces.