

The Architecture School of Commons and six itinerant workshops

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Rural communities exist in the shadows of big cities. Frantic competition, rapid development, overtourism, perpetual movement, and sophisticated lifestyles are not part of their vocabulary. Rural communities grapple instead with abandonment, lack of hope and alternatives, pollution, and depletion of their natural resources. As described in the seminal “Countryside: A Report” by AMO/Rem Koolhaas (2020), rural areas and communities are the production engines for food and natural resources, they sustain urban populations worldwide, but they remain an “ignored realm” and are often turned into “sacrificial zones”. The problems rural communities face may seem trivial, irrelevant, small-scale, remote, or even unimportant to the rest of us, but they represent the invisible reality for a large portion of the planet.

How can we reimagine architectural education and practice by addressing cross-cutting issues that affect rural communities in three different countries in Europe by joining forces in order to better address common issues?

This question has been central to the conception of the Architecture School of Commons (ASOC), an experimental and collaborative three-year project that recognizes the role schools of architecture can play in preparing citizen architects with a heightened awareness, and with the appropriate skills to address contemporary social and ecological challenges. Thanks to an Erasmus+ grant, the European “Architecture School of Commons” project became possible. In its third year already (2022–2024), ASOC has been organizing and hosting intensive experiential workshops that bring together students and professors from three European schools of architecture, three collectives of architects, and three local initiatives operating in rural communities in France, Italy, and Greece. **The partner schools of architecture are the [National Technical University of Athens \(NTUA\)](#), the [Ecole Nationale d’Architecture de Grenoble \(ENSAG\)](#), and [DAD/Politecnico di Torino](#). The partner architect collectives are [Collectif Etc \(FR\)](#) who were also the initiators of ASOC, [Zuloark \(GR\)](#), and [Orizzontale \(IT\)](#). And the local initiatives in the three countries are Les Tracols (FR), Les Seppie (IT), and Tirilab (GR).**

The ASOC project focuses on revitalizing rural communities by reusing formerly abandoned buildings to host newly imagined common spaces in France, Italy, and Greece. There are two in each host location, six workshops in total: three main ones with all partners and ten students from each university, and three preparatory ones. The preparatory workshops, limited to the partners and students from the host country’s university lay the groundwork for the larger main workshops. A former textile factory in the Saint Laurent en Royans region of France, now reincarnated as La Place des Possibles, a former nunnery now known as Casa di Belmondo in the Belmonte region of Calabria in Italy, and a former school revitalised by the Tirilab initiative in the Thesprotia region of northern Greece have served as the settings for the three ASOC workshops in 2022, 2023, and 2024. Students, or apprentices to recall that old-fashioned term, work with experts in socially and environmentally engaged architecture, experimenting with materials, details, and building techniques. This is achieved through design and construction workshops, with the use of wood and readily available recycled materials. Learning on-site through hands-on experience, embedded in the community, proves revelatory for the participating students. ASOC views these workshops as radical architectural pedagogies of living together, learning on the field, and creating, within a community. All the workshops are founded on a strong commitment to serve communities through the reuse of existing

buildings, to foster acts of commoning, and to promote pedagogies of care, conviviality, and social and ecological awareness. The projects involve different scales, uses, histories, cultures, and typologies, but face similar crises such as lack of maintenance or measures for meaningful and relevant reuse. On the long run it is expected that through these efforts, the communities will become sustainable and redefine their identities.

The inaugural ASOC workshop was hosted at La Place des Possibles, a former textiles factory now operating as a social space for various community activities, and was organized by [CollectifETC](#). Four working groups (Building, Territorial, Events, Editorial) in the morning were geared towards producing tangible results, and “meta groups” were conceived to monitor and examine the activities. These were complemented by collaborative cooking and shared meals, and morning physical exercises and contributed towards a collective experience of extraordinary energy, creativity, conviviality. The ASOC workshop made itself felt and interacted with the local community on several occasions; a newly finished mobile bar was taken to the village square for a celebratory event, and a half-day workshop event took place at the nearby riverbanks. The territorial group visited several sites and interviewed local businesses and residents, documented in podcasts. The workshop concluded with an open house, in which the community joined ASOC at La Place des Possibles. The Italian cycle in Belmonte, Calabro, occurred between August 28 and September 3, 2023. The Italian partners [La Rivoluzione delle Seppie](#) and [Orizzontale](#) adopted the theme “Umano, Non-Umano,” aiming to expand students’ perspectives beyond anthropocentric views. Students were divided into the Building BELMONDO group and the Living BELMONDO group. The daily activities were complemented in the evenings by the InterCommons seminar, which provided moments of reflection and opportunities to discuss theoretical and practical aspects of the commons and the workshop itself. Highlights of the Italian cycle included proximity between living and working in the medieval town, evenings spent in the village square, and occasional excursions to the coast. The learning curve from the French cycle as well as the village atmosphere made the Italian week flow more naturally. The Mediterranean temperament, the spirit of a historic town, and of course, Italian food were some of the highlights. The Greek cycle began with a preparatory workshop from May 7 to 11, 2024. The workshop theme, “GRR-Waterlandscapes,” conceived by our hosts [TiriLab](#) and [Zuloark](#) examines water resources which face shortages in the Mediterranean. Excessive use due to overtourism, poor water management, reduced rainfall, and increasing heat waves caused by climate change contribute to a problem which might soon become critical in many parts of Europe, and Greece is at high risk. The main workshop focused on converting the abandoned school structure of the community into a multifunctional social common space by creating seating benches, tables, and a kitchen counter. Evenings were occupied by explorative walks around Morfi (coined “travesías” after the [School of Valparaiso itinerant educational tradition](#) known by that name), which helped participants understand the context and spirit of the place. The main and final workshop closing the three-year cycle is scheduled to occur between August 26 and September 2.

Architectural education, communities, their history, and the problems they face have commonalities between France, Italy, and Greece, but also significant differences. Delving into the universal and local characteristics of the three case studies has been an educational process which serves as an open resource for the participants and for anyone interested.

What was achieved in the condensed tie of three weeks had an impact and has left an imprint smaller or larger, different in each of the three cases. It would be great to have the potential to revisit in five years’ time each of them to see where they stand and what was the route they took and how the ASOC has impacted this, if at all.