

Learning in the Existing. Reprogramming, Dispersing, and Recovering the Urban School

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The proposed contribution reflects on three consecutive design-research studios that address the transformation of educational spaces within dense urban contexts. Framed within challenges of urban cores, these studios explore adaptive reuse as a critical design approach grounded in existing spatial, social, and material conditions. The first case, The Dispersed School, investigates the renunciation of the conventional, monolithic school building by proposing a distributed system of educational spaces embedded within the historical urban block. By working with existing structures and residual spaces, the studio advances low-tech, resource-conscious interventions that redefine the relationship between school and city, emphasizing proximity, adaptability, and shared public use. The second case, School Forum: Redux, shifts towards recovery through the reinterpretation and extension of a historically layered educational campus initiated in the 19th century but never fully realized. Students engage with inherited urban fragments, both built and unbuilt, developing strategies of addition, interpolation, and reinterpretation. This approach balances conservation with transformation, acknowledging temporal continuities while enabling new pedagogical and spatial configurations. The third case, Reprogramming Schools, directly addresses the adaptation and extension of existing school buildings erected in the first half of the 20th century to contemporary educational demands, including full-day schooling and changing demographic conditions. Through processes of reprogramming, addition, and partial transformation, students explore how existing typologies can be recalibrated to accommodate new uses, didactic responsibilities and community interfaces. Across the three studios, architectural education becomes a laboratory for testing the implicit didacticism of educational environments while engaging with the social role of learning infrastructure. The studio framing, as well as the projects, demonstrates how recovering latent capacities within built environments can generate resilient, context-specific responses that align architectural practice with ecological and societal imperatives. The concept of didactic space thus evolves, situating students within a space which is simultaneously a direct learning experience.