

Experimental Practice. Architecture as a Shared Field of an Exploratory Rethink

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ABSTRACT: Experimental practice – ExP, a new master course in architecture at NTNU, Norway, starts with the premise that architectural design knowledge is not made from static, unvarying facts. It is not a commodity one can purchase and therefore own it in its primary, unchangeable form. On the contrary, it is owned only when experienced through practices that are experimental and as such open to infinite processes of enquiry and critical thinking; through letting the *knowns* shift and adapt to everchanging circumstances. ExP tackles and frames its concerns with its course of action, shifts in protocols, experimental methods, and evolving strategies. That is, with an experimental set of actions tested out through the shared design experience and exchanges in real-time/space with student/teacher team members.

KEYWORDS: experimental pedagogies, full-scale, Archi-theatre, collective/embodied/experiential/contextual knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

“The human might be the only species to have systematically designed its own extinction and seems to be getting close to accomplishing the goal. Yet it largely acts as if it cannot do anything about it, staring at the prospect of its own demise as if transfixed, even with a lingering sense of pride in this massive self-destructive accomplishment.” from “Are we Human?” (Colomina & Wigley, 2016 p.15)

Experimental practice - ExP starts with the premise that architectural design knowledge is not made from static, unvarying facts. It is not a commodity one can purchase and therefore own it in its primary, unchangeable form. On the contrary, it is owned only when experienced through experimental practices and as such open to infinite processes of enquiry and critical thinking; through letting the knowns shift and adapt to ever-changing circumstances. In the face of human-designed environmental disasters and instability that everyone is confronted with worldwide, ExP suggests that what one does come to own in fact is the *not-knowing*.

While ExP does acknowledge that there are *architectly* ways of knowing, it contemplates whether these very ways have led us astray towards self-extinction. Instead of claiming to know how the design processes operate and should work. ExP issues a call to question everything that we thought were “the known” protocols in our field – architecture.

As far as ExP is concerned the only constant in the architectural design knowledge equation is a continuous process of enquiry. In other words: the architectural design knowledge lies in the very process of the enquiry, as much, if not more as in its outcome. Suggesting further that the process of architectural design may never come to “an end”.

1.0 EXPERIMENTAL GROUNDING OF THE PRACTICE

1.1 When does it end really?

When the design is drafted, plotted signed and sealed; when it gets constructed; when it gets populated by its users; does it ever? There is “no stopping rule” (Rittel and Webber 1973) that challenges the dominant outcome-driven approach in design.

The question of the role and capacity of an architect arises, and consequently of the roles of all other stakeholders in the design process. Presuming that architects initiate the process with their design concepts and ideas, joined then by many others involved in the design cycles, municipality officers, engineers, construction workers, craftsmen, clients, and users, the design emerges and lives its life that spans and evolves through time - for how long and who gets to design along the way? Can we see architecture as a co-created reality, a shared field in the continuous state of making?

ExP tackles and frames these concerns with its course of action, shifts in protocols, experimental methods, and evolving strategies. That is, with an experimental set of actions tested out through the shared design experience and exchanges in a real-time/space with student/teacher team members.

The experience is recapped, rethought, and revisited here for further elaboration and growth, starting with the excerpts from the brief communicated to the students before the start of the course in the autumn semester 2022.



Figure 1: Activating the outdoor kitchen. Source: (Raonic 2022)

1.2. Excerpts from the experimental practice - ExP (AAR4612) brief

We will be designing and building in context, for a client. However, the ambitions of ExP are multi-layered and go beyond the building practice. The emphasis is on experimentation and risk-taking, but with strong theoretical grounding and reasoning of the processes.

We experiment with and investigate new ways of architectural thinking, of how we position ourselves in the context, in the design process, towards the technological, material and cultural heritage, and in nature.

We are free to question everything and to dive into the unknown.

We do that through referencing and connecting to other creative disciplines - philosophy, art (film, music..), crafts (textile crafts etc.).

Interdisciplinarity is a well-known route to innovation, but also a way to establish a system of values, narratives and wisdoms that will inform and make our architectural processes well-grounded.

Further, we go very basic - back to land, to Earth.

We ground ourselves to learn the basics all over again, to understand better what it means to be human, in relation to nature, to the planet, and to the cultural and technological heritage.

What it means to be sustainable?

Related to this is a question of the role of an architect in society as it is today but looking towards a sustainable future.

We ask: Are we human because we design (architecture)?

And if so, how ought we to design (toward a sustainable future)?

We wish to empower the practice of architectural thinking and acting (designing and building) as an exciting new research journey towards innovation that is informed by multilayers found in our cultural, technological, and natural landscapes.

At the core of every research is a journey into a discovery of the unknown, in an open-ended direction, and this is where we are heading too!

This entails practices, activities and rituals that are somewhat new to our discipline (architecture), and as such may contain the element of strangeness. Some of the *strange methods* to be employed:

1: *Walk the land*

collecting experiences, artefacts, material samples, plants, smells, sounds tastes, and intimate embodied experiences.

2: *Nesting in*

sleeping and living on the site, becoming a part of the site (figure 2)

3: *Archi-Theatre*

Performance as a mediator between Thinking and Making: Perform your architectural philosophy = Perform your architecture!

4: *Displacement*

learning through the change of context; study trip as a design instrument.



Figure 2: Nesting in. Source: (Raonic 2022)

2.0. FOUR FULL-SCALE PROJECTS AT THE FOREST & FARM TESTIMONIALS

In this section, we will stroll through students' design experiences as documented and reflected upon in the booklets/design journals that have been composed for each project/activity respectively. These notes and testimonials showcase how the framing of the course balances out the pre-set conditions with the parts that were intentionally left out un-prescribed; yet to be shaped, filled, discovered, and introduced by the students themselves. Students navigate the course of action within the given context and the set framework.

The outdoor kitchen - kitchen as a gathering place in the forest:

The fire and the table or the fire and the platform (figure 1).

Tools

A broom
a shovel
a land chopper
hammer & chisel
a lopper
ropes
women power

Small interventions

The tools as an extension of our hands. Simple tools. Keep a connection between hands and the site.
The platform, made entirely out of material from the site itself, follows the line of stones and becomes part of nature (figure 1).



Figure 3: A chicken house on wheels in the making. Source: (Raonic 2022)

Chicken house on wheels:

Working, eating and sleeping on site, together with the clients, i.e. a group of hens (figure 2). Reusing. Using the material found on the farm, only. (figure 3)



Figure 4: Horse shelter in the making reviewed by clients. Source: (Raonic 2022)

Shelter

How can we make a good frame design, how will it be used at the farm? How can this be made by us using relatively sparse tools in a limited time? (figure 4)

Materials

Timber from the trees that we cut in the forest.
Reused items from the farm.

Tools

- 3 Drills
- 2 Circle saws
- A lot of screws
- A hammer
- A handsaw

Foundation

- 6 Big bold stones

4 Logs from nearby spruces
6 *Jordskruer*

Structural material

11/2 Spruce trees, freshly cut into planks.
8 Re-used corrugated metal sheets



Figure 5: Floor growing. Source: (Raonic 2022)

Room to rest in the woods

Materials harvested from the site. (figure 5-6).
Tree trunk for logs on the floor. Thinner trunks for the wall. Branches for weaving.

Materials

- Logs
- Branches
- Stones
- Soil
- Blue wire
- Hemp
- Waterproof textile

Tools

- axe
- shovel
- drill
- hammer & chisel
- ladder
- blue rope
- hemp
- Pickaxe
- gloves
- measuring tape
- a green box

Cleaning the site with our hands

Cut the branches, use an axe to cut down trees.
Building the awareness of the elements we chose to use.
The woven roof floats over the heavy floor (figure 6). An intimate space in the middle of nature.



Figure 6: Roof weaving. (Raonic 2022)

3.0. ARCHITHEATRE

The idea of this hybrid exercise that combines architecture, exhibition design and stage design with performance and conceptual art, was to re-open a question on space: What is space?

Architecture clearly does not hold a monopoly on space. The idea of space is something that permeates the discourse of many different fields beyond architecture, of dance, film, music, dance etc. Hence, this exercise that was introduced to the students as design task no.2, in the second part of the semester, asked them to: Design and build a site-specific Exhibition that translates all their *designerly* and any other collective & individual experiences and knowledge into a new kind of spatial narrative that will in addition be activated by their performance – ArchiTheater. (Raonic 2022)



Figure 7: ArchiTheater. Source: (Raonic 2022)

As for the initial design tasks, the objectives were to rethink design strategies and construct a discourse around questions of space and sustainability, to use locally available, locally sourced materials for designing and building their work. “The trees that grow in your backyard” as said in the lecture slides, meaning the four projects in the forest & farm were to use the material found there, on the location, in natural surroundings, while the exhibition project was to use the material found on/around campus, on the streets, in the urban context.

Archi-theatre shifted the roles of architects to artists and performers, enabling the architects to re-live their own work in the forest and on the farm, recontextualize it and re-evaluate from a different perspective. The Exhibition & ArchiTheatre operated as a stage to showcase and translate the plethora of experiences and encounters, individual and collective, from Norway to India, from theory to various craft experiences and perspectives, all to be woven together in a new spatial narrative. Finally, the architecture is shifted into a story-telling device, and an architect to a narrator.

ArchiTheater bridges between architecture and performance art and pinpoints their shared core concern: the interplay of bodies and space (Aubin 2019). It points to an expanded understanding of architecture highlighting that the movement of bodies in space is just as important as the space itself (Tschumi 2008).

Collective and individual design experiences are collected, recomposed, rearranged and articulated in a new system of meaning. The exhibition is as a design output, but also as a tool, for rethinking, reliving and an opportunity to address the fundamental questions about what it takes to make space (figure 7-8).

Students were invited to translate and *stage* their experiences and let them evolve in time, allowing for various interactions with the visitors who may become participants and add to the spatial narrative, or rearrange its parts, while impacting the whole. Architecture becomes a shared field of interaction, a non-verbal instrument of communication between the architects and visitors. Instruments for investigation. In the best tradition of Price and Littlewood's Fun Palace "a university of the streets" and "laboratory of fun" (Littlewood, 1964), questioning what is architecture, who is an architect and who is an observer. Where is the line if any?

ArchiTheater frames two general topic areas that it sees as forming a bridge between performance art and student's particular approach to architecture. The first concerns modes of transdisciplinary practice and the second addresses issues related to movement and temporality. The exhibition becomes a stage for rethinking architecture, while the architect's body is addressed as a design tool, that allows us to live through the design. Design is lived through not only analysed and conceptualised rationally.



Figure 8: ArchiTheater+exhibition. Source: (Raonic 2022)

CONCLUSION

Coming from the position of NOT-KNOWING, starting from scratch again, assuming all we know is open for continuous re-questioning. This is the precondition that Experimental Practice has set, in framing its curriculum. Navigated by material, cultural, natural context, design tasks, clients and many other parameters involved in a complex equation that architectural design processes and teaching/learning architecture always are, ExP lets them take their own course.

But why? It comes down to acknowledging that we, humanity, and our profession in particular are at the cul-de-sac of the era of Anthropocene and associated culture. We have been for too long acting non-critically, over-building, over-producing and over-loading the planet, without ever really challenging why, how, and what happens after; never really facing the consequences until it has become too late.

Hence, ExP invites students and teachers together to question everything that we thought were the laws of the profession, the know-hows, through framed pedagogic format, that offers several experimental strategies and methods presented and discussed in these pages. *Shift* as a primary, back-bone strategy that has taken many different forms.

We have been shifting the roles of architects to lumberjacks, to basket weavers, to sewers, to artists, farmers, weavers, performers. Students/teachers' roles have been shifting and swapping all along. We introduced shifts in the organisation of the design process, in the order of the design & construction phases and in their duration. We cut and collect natural fibres, stones, branches and wood before we draw.

Instead of drawing and sketching on paper first, we draw in space directly with the material found on the site. We treat space-making as three-dimensional sketching. The architecture grows from the land with the material resourced locally, along as we grow from architects to becoming integral part of the context. We take time to observe, read, understand the sites intimately, and soak in the smells, sounds and atmosphere.

With strange methods, *Nesting in* and *Walk the Land*, the traditional “site analysis” shifts from rationalising physical features, measuring and observing as impartial external experts, to living on and becoming a part of the site. The role of an architect shifts to an off-grid forest dweller, along with all other forest animals.

Archi-theatre shifts architects to artists and performers, enabling the architects to re-live their own work in the forest and on the farm, recontextualize it and re-evaluate it in that way. Archi-theatre and exhibition operated as a stage to showcase and translate the plethora of experiences and encounters, individual and collective, from theory to various craft perspectives, all to be woven together in a new spatial narrative. Finally, the architecture is shifted into a story-telling device, and an architect to a narrator.

Interdisciplinarity is a well-known route to innovation, and here it has been instrumentalised to a greater extent for the sake of learning within the field but moreover for learning more about the field of architecture; about how it could be transformed into a more socially, politically, culturally, and ecologically sustainable legacy that humanity should leave behind.

The experiential, embodied, hands-on learning, that shifted the process and crossed the borders of academia, of cultures, of the discipline; having spent more time outside of (what conventionally is considered) the discipline, than within, led to quite a few invaluable gifts to collect.

This kind of experimental and non-reductionist approach not only helped re-affirm more sustainable connections with the immediate context in a real space/time, but also beyond the realm of the present moment and locus. The connections were made with the past and across the globe.

The craft intelligence and wisdoms that are treasured only in the experienced crafts people’s hands, travelled through time, from Norway and India to be transferred into space-making techniques in an entirely different context, in order to do things in architecture in a whole different way:

“In EXPERIMENTAL PRACTICE

We ask the fundamental questions of architecture all over again.

We go back to the basics to rethink the role of an architect in society as it is today towards a SUSTAINABLE future.

We challenge the usual practices of SPACE MAKING and learn from other disciplines.

We tailor the roof.

We stitch the house.

We grow the floor.

We weave the wood.

Forest, rain, sheep, stone, farmer, horse, weaver, child are our clients and our teachers.”

from forward to Rethinking Spaces exhibition (Raonic 2022)

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