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A estruturação de problemas como opção metodológica na concepção projetual

The structuring of problems as a methodological option in design conception

La estructuración de problemas como una opción metodológica en la concepción del proyecto

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RESUMO

Apresenta-se, neste trabalho, uma reflexão sobre a proposta metodológica adotada no Atelier Internacional de Criação Urbana Equinox que se realiza desde 2009. Na primeira parte discute-se a metodologia focada no projeto como um processo de estruturação de problemas constituindo, assim, um momento de reflexão pelo próprio projeto, apresentando-se as fases específicas de conceitualização ou adoção de um conceito que orienta o projeto e da adoção das referências projetuais. No segundo momento, discute-se a importância do intercâmbio internacional, a importância de colocar, lado a lado, estudantes de contextos diferentes, de nacionalidades diferentes e mesmo de diferentes backgrounds, característica deste atelier que reúne estudantes de arquitetura e urbanismo e de engenharia urbana, e mais recentemente de arquitetura da paisagem, ressaltando-se as vantagens do olhar do “outro” sobre as questões aparentemente específicas de um determinado contexto. Identificam-se as contribuições para a construção de um novo olhar sobre as questões urbanas e uma nova prática pedagógica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Criação urbana, metodologia de projeto, concepção projetual

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a reflection on the methodological approach adopted in the International Atelier of Urban Creation Equinox that happens since 2009. In the first part, it details the design methodology that makes the project a process of problem structuring, building thought through the design process, showing the specific phases of conceptualization or of adopting a concept that guides the project and the choice of design references. In the second part, it discusses the importance of the international exchange and of putting side by side students from different contexts, nationalities and even different backgrounds as is characteristic of the workshop that unites students in architecture and urbanism, students in urban engineering, and, more recently, students in landscape architecture. It seeks specially to highlight the advantages of the look from the ‘other’ in apparently specific issues within a certain context. It identifies the contribution for a new outlook on urban issues and a new pedagogical practice. Finally, we seek to discuss the limitations and the challenges to overcome.

KEY-WORDS: Urban creation, design methodology, design conception

RESUMEN

Presentamos en este trabajo, una reflexión sobre el enfoque metodológico adoptado en el Taller Internacional de Creación Urbana Equinox que ocurre desde 2009. La primera parte analiza la metodología que se centró en el diseño como un proceso de solución de estructuración, lo que constituye un momento de reflexión por el propio proyecto, seguida de la presentación de las fases específicas de conceptualización o adopción de un concepto detrás del diseño y la adopción de referencias proyectivas. En la segunda, se discute la importancia del intercambio internacional, la importancia de colocar lado a lado, los estudiantes de diferentes orígenes, de diferentes nacionalidades, e incluso diferentes orígenes profesionales, características de este taller que reúne a estudiantes de arquitectura y el urbanismo y la ingeniería urbana, y más recientemente la arquitectura del paisaje, destacando las ventajas de la mirada del “otro” en los temas aparentemente propios de un contexto particular e las contribuciones a la construcción de una nueva mirada a los problemas urbanos y una nueva práctica pedagógica.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Creación urbana, metodología de diseño, diseño projetual

1 INTRODUCTION

“Not knowing it was impossible he went ahead and did it,” sometimes attributed to Mark Twain, sometimes to Jean Cocteau, this quote could be considered an inspiration for the International Workshop on Urban Creation Equinox. It expresses the idea of thinking the urban space in all its possibilities and potential without constraints, aiming to contribute to new perspectives and ways of intervening and creating cities – within a perspective of a more equalitarian habitat, and of educating more critical and conscientious professionals that will be better prepared to face the current urban challenges.

There is a popular slogan in Brazilian urban and city planning: to know the “city we have” in order to build the “city we want”. Certainly, the use of the two expressions “the city we have” and “the city we want” are just way of explaining the traditional paths to any urban planning or project: diagnosis that leads to a program that leads to a plan. For the purpose of the analyses proposed in this paper, it is used solely to identify the two phases.

In that sense, the logical path is to proceed to extensive and deep analysis of the site in order to understand what can be done to make it a better place, to make the city we have become the city we want. Therefore, the plan or the design for that place becomes the product that concentrates and offers the answers to the problems.

It is like the part of the equation “the city we want” was related to the realm of the future. On the other hand, the other part, the city we have, could be seen as the part that anchors the activity of planning to the reality. And it is not impossible that, hidden within this context is the idea that changing reality is only possible within the limits that reality itself imposes: financial limits, technological limits and even cultural limits.

All of that, as Lassance (2012) correctly points out, is a consequence of the influence of the inductive empiricist logic that states that the direct observation and analysis of the facts is the only possible path towards scientific discovery.

It is Lassance (2012) that reminds us that the key *concept* of the wicked problem introduced by Horst J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber in the 1970s that the inductive method in urban and city planning collapsed. For Horst and Webber (1973) a wicked problem is one for which each attempt to create a solution changes the understanding of the problem. Stating urban planning problems as “wicked problems” allowed a recognition of the very nature of urban planning process as a problem-structuring process instead of the result or solution of well-defined problems.

In our understanding, placing the structuring of problems as a methodological approach in urban design conception inverts the logic that places the project as the product resultant of a very detailed operation of diagnosis. It reverses the idea that first we have to know “the city we have” for knowing what to do to make the city we want. In fact, it proposes to think about the “city we want” in order to be find out what we have to do to change the “city we have”.

The moment this order is reversed the design or plan turns into the fundamental act. It allows to understand not only the site of intervention but what is necessary to do to change it in the place we want. The plan materializes the solution, or one or more of the possible solutions to the challenges the site in question presents. From that point, the plan guides the process of understanding the urban site and its challenges, and the production of what is intended to be a new and transformed site, a better place to live.



This proposal finds echo in the idea that the act of designing itself is an act that produces knowledge. The idea is that designing and, more specifically in this case, urban designing, as Paola Viganò (2012, p.11) states, is a specific form of questioning the reality as well as a practical activity oriented towards the transformation of the space.

Certainly, inverting that order brings several questions: first, thinking of “the city we want” can lead to thinking of the ideal cities, or the ideal urban spaces, the utopian places that are simply impossible to construct. Nevertheless, no matter what, the act of planning or designing the urban environment is an act of thinking of the future, an act of designing the future. Urbanism as an activity that is involved with plans and designing cities and urban sites has a strong component and field of action or territory as says Viganò (2012) that belongs to the future.

In fact, Viganò (2012, p.13) understands that the project, and here we talk about the urban project, is a dispositive cognitive, producer of a new knowledge, capable as an instrument, of exploring a context and of integrating new elements to the knowledge already existent. The project is one way and one tool for study and for researches and in this condition it reconstructs, contextualizes e reorganizes the reality. And she also argues that the project plays the role of a tool of critique entre the actors and the places.

The project acts, then, in three of what she called territories: the first one is the territory of ideas, the second, the territory of description and finally the territory of the future. In the first territory, the projectual activity uses and interprets and reinterprets the concepts. In the second, the project is, in itself, a particular form of description because it is an activity which identifies the situations, establishes relationships with them, and this description gives an identity to each place. In the third territory, the projectual activity produces knowledge by conjectures about the future, by projecting the future.

It is in this territory that the forces of desire and imagination works to transform the reality that is not satisfactory.

Bauman (2001) argues that in emancipation, as intended by modernity, we feel free if our imagination does not exceed our desires and if our desires and imagination are balanced with our ability to act. Such balance may be reached and kept in two different ways: by reducing desires or the imagination or by amplifying the ability to act.

Transferring that idea to city and urbanism, it is possible to say that to make the city we want, within the limits of real possibilities, can be accomplished either by reducing the desires or imagination or by increasing the ability to act.

The atelier’s proposal is to educate to seek to increase the capacity of action. Paraphrasing Žižek (2011), what is possible has often been used as an obstacle in the developing of full potentialities.

The next part presents the methodology of the Workshop Equinox that shows how urban designing and planning can be approached as a problem-structuring process instead of the more traditional understanding, as a solution to well-defined problems. It presents how the concept acts as the synthesis of the objectives and how this phase relies on the creative and powerful forces of utopias and how actual and concrete references anchored that forces to possible futures (SECCHI,2006). Then the paper analyzes the advantages of working in a multicultural and multiprofessional environment.



2 URBAN DESIGNING AND PLANNING AS A PROBLEM-STRUCTURING PROCESS

The pedagogical practice adopted in the Workshop subverts openly the conventional processes conducted by the more traditional learning institutions. The phase of site analysis or diagnosis that is traditionally the first one to be conducted is then postponed and will be oriented by an initial hypothesis of intervention. That initial hypothesis appears in the first moment as an abstract concept that synthesizes the idea of the plan or project to be done.

It represents desire and imagination; it becomes the tool that increases the capacity of action. The concept summarizes the plan's idea, the design intention.

"Old center, young spirit", was for instance, one concept that was formulated in the first experience of the Equinox workshop in 2009. It summarizes the desire of transforming the old historic city center of São Luis in a place for the youth, in order to reverse its current flow of abandonment. "The Conquerors" is another concept that inverts the logic of a place that has been conquered by the European in the 1600's and now, due to the status of World Heritage List is ready to conquer, even in other basis, the rest of the world.

In the most recent edition in 2014, the concept of "Be like Water", thought for Genevilliers in the Grand-Paris region defines the plan that seeks to use the water, or better, the qualities of the water to transform Genevilliers. The audacity of this concept appears even bigger when confronted with the reality of a place that is at flood risk as Genevilliers. Or the concept "NodeBeat" that uses the analogy of applications to make music in electronic devices in order to create a plan that proposes nodes of connections with Genevilliers and the region of Grand-Paris. Or a more elaborated and, why do not say, poetic vision of building a Urban Melody, with the city sounds, the voices of the people who live there, the "voices" of the place, dissonant or harmonious.

Furthermore, the abstract concept that synthesizes the plan contains, expresses and identifies itself with the site that has been studied. Therefore, saying that the diagnosis will be postponed does not signify that the teams of students in the workshop are completely ignorant of the site conditions, that they do not know anything about its characteristics. On the contrary, the process of knowing the site is stimulated through the process of designing, in which the formulating of the concept is the initial phase. Therefore, since the initial phase, the student is invited to think about the site and to study it in order to formulate the concept. During this phase, which is intensely carried out in the first week of the workshop, the students visit the site and conduct research about it, as much as necessary.

To be capable of formulating such initial hypothesis is part of the challenge of the workshop. It requires the ability of projecting in the future what will be better to do. Continuing the discussion in terms of the city we have or the city we want, it requires to project in the future, the city we want.

To study and intervene in the city requires also to understand that this is a complex, hybrid, inter or multidisciplinary activity that deals with multiple scales and uncertain contexts. The formulation of an abstract concept that could summarize the idea of planning or designing is not accomplished outside this framework.

For this, the concept becomes an act of conceiving or creating, it is one key to promote a new outlook on cities and urban environment. And that's how the methodology favors the urban project as problem-structuring process.



One important element while in the initial phase of conceptualization is that there are no constraints. The students are invited to think freely in all fields, making this a methodology sustained by the critical and imaginative force of utopias. In all fields, but one, it is important to say. Whatever they want to do, the plan must respect the people who live in the site in question. The central idea is creating a better place to live and for that, that are no other limitations.

Within this limit, it does not matter how much it will cost or even if that kind of intervention has never been thought for that place before. The objective is to increase the capacity to act and in doing so, be able of building a better place.

However, an increased capacity of action means learning to recognize, accept and learn how to work within limits. Thus, it is important to acknowledge references in urban projects, anchoring the concept in real and concrete experiences, outlining what can be called a possible future as stated by Secchi (2006).

If the initial phase subverts the traditional way of approaching the designing act, transforming or better yet acknowledging this activity as activity that produces knowledge, the search for references relies in the concrete experiences already built, which can be seen, especially in the architecture field, as not so necessary since the creative force themselves are seen as determinant for success for designing in this field.

Two things must be said: first of all, learning from existing concrete experiences does not mean to do the exact same thing. It is important to recognize the differences, and to understand that this phase is a designed to search for solutions that could work. Second of all, to recognize a solution as an adequate one for the plan in question does not mean to adopt it without restrictions.

The references work as tools to dissolve the resistance to new ideas, to destroy prejudices, to think of new and open minded solutions.

At this point it is important to say that a vital component of the Equinox Workshop is the exchange of ideas that is a result of merging two cultural realities, at first by bringing together first two (France and Brazil, 2009, 2010) and later three (Italy was included in 2012) different nationalities and professional backgrounds (students in architecture and urbanism, students in urban engineering, and, more recently, students in landscape architecture).

It is very remarkable how it is possible to recognize the advantages of the look from the 'other' towards apparently specific issues. For instance, the idea of São Luis being a link in the chain of International World Heritage in Latin America in Caribbean was brought to light via the French student's concept in Equinox 2009.

At the same time, the look of the other towards the local prejudices can bring unexpected approaches that become new possibilities.

3 FINAL COMMENTS

From the initial concept and the Project references, the groups developed the proposals for the site within the desired timeframe. In at least two instances the results were tested through presentation to the public: in 2010, to the municipal administration of Mont de Marsan, in the south of France, and in 2014, to employees of the municipality of Genevilliers, in the Grand-



Paris region. In both occasions, the proposals were well-received, not as complete projects but as well thought out ideas for the site. This has been one of the most promising results: the free discussion of ideas, free from constraints and prejudices engaged only in transforming the site into a better place for living, as stated by François Monjal, in the first few editions of Equinox.

The question of how much this process allows for new outlooks and new practices of interventions in the urban space and how much it contributes to create professionals that are more critical and conscientious of the urban context – and even if it is possible to measure this contribution – has its answer here, through these evaluations.

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