
Living Where The Immaterial Matters; (Unit 2, year 4th and 5th)

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ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on the questions raised through the work of Unit 2: Living Where the Immaterial Matters, a research based studio of the 4th and 5th years of the professional degree at the University of Nicosia. Our unit's core investigation is to provoke a debate on the issue of immaterial matter and its potential role in Innovative Architecture. The unit examines the relationship of the immaterial to the build environment.

We investigate the intangible qualities of architecture, immaterial matters that can create new typologies targeting to innovative living solutions. It is expected from the students, in this level of their studies, to tackle with the issue of the immateriality as an indispensable part of the material matter and the tectonics.

The notion of the boundary as a physical and an immaterial entity forms the vehicle through which investigations begin and might end. We see Boundaries as Thresholds between contrasting conditions, grey zones of crossing limits, edges of different entities.

The Methodology of the unit is of equal importance with the research question. Our approach is empirical. Through the act of trial and error we approach architecture as an on-going process.

The Unit's thematic is INNOVATIVE LIVING + EVENT. The everyday permanent programme of living such as social housing, urban (re) development is generated through an insertion of an event. The 'Living' + 'Event' is been tested as a catalyst in order to investigate the main questions of the unit: immaterial matter and its potential role in innovative architecture.

IMMATERIAL MATTER

1. 2.1 Unit's Core Investigation

This paper will focus on the questions raised through the work of Unit 2, 4th and 5th year's studio, of the professional degree at the University of Nicosia. The Unit is structured as a research based studio.

Our unit's core investigation is to provoke a debate on the issue of immaterial matter and its potential role in innovative architecture. It explores a new approach where Movement and Pause, Rhythm, Notion of Time, Void and Mass, and Sequence of Spaces, filtered through the notion of Fluidity are the main ingredients of "cooking" architecture and the city. Flows and building are interwoven into a unified urban entity.

Our studio is examining the relationship of the immaterial to the build environment. We investigate the intangible qualities of architecture, immaterial matters that can create new typologies targeting to innovative living solutions. As Immaterial we refer to the Japanese notion of "Ma": gap, void, pause, movement and spatial perception, the programme as a strategy, time and space, senses and atmospheres, light and darkness.

The Unit's thematic is INNOVATIVE LIVING + EVENT. The 'Living' + 'Event' is been tested as a catalyst in order to investigate the main questions of the unit: immaterial matter and its potential role in innovative architecture. Our approach is empirical. Through the act of trial and error we approach architecture as an on-going process.

1.1 Identity

Through the investigation of the materiality and mainly the immateriality the students are urged to foster a more personal identity in the design process. In order to manage this, major significance in the projects is laid on the creation and enhancement of the atmospheres and the environment. Intangible qualities are considered of a great value, one of the strongest qualities of a project, and a generator of new innovative living spaces. The 3 constituent elements of the Unit its questions, the thematic together with the methodology, all participating with the same significance and role enabled to proceed to the direction of innovation and fostering of an identity.

2. 2.3 Boundaries

During the last academic year 2010-11 our unit has developed a particular interest and concentration on the juxtaposition of contradicting parameters and questioning dualities. Architecture was viewed through the prism of binaries such as: Tactile – Immaterial; Tectonic- Atmospheric; Unexpected – Familiar; Fragmented - Whole; Chance factors – Planned; Aging – Evanescent. Through this year's thematic we build on this gained knowledge by shifting the focus on the treatment of **boundaries**. The notion of the boundaries as a physical and an immaterial entity forms the vehicles through which investigations begin and might end.

We investigate **Boundaries** as **Thresholds** between contrasting conditions, grey zones of crossing limits, edges of different entities. The unit encourages the students to explore the notion of boundaries through testing the relationships of: The envelope of a building and its surroundings; the treatment of surfaces and their materiality; Public and private relations; Void, Mass and the “In between”; Programmatic requirements and the Notion of ‘Mui’ (non-functional space).

While testing a wide range of contradicting conditions in the material and immaterial world, unexpected interexchange of conditions took place: questioning of the threshold between the natural ground and the built environment led to solutions that generally tackle with the redefinition of what is natural and artificial. Parts of the soil as ground are met in the upper level of the interventions; cultivating is becoming a process and a main materiality of a project, having land-scape in juxtaposition with built-scape to be the centre of spatial investigations.

2.4 Flows

It is expected from the students to tackle with the issue of **fluidity** as an indispensable part of the material matter and the tectonics. Through their project students are expected to investigate and concentrate on the notion of movement that weaves and defines the entrance, the public and private, the open and close and of course the “Ma” interval space.

Fluidity can be defined as the flow of people through the city and within the site, the continuously changing urban atmospheres that become an indispensable part of the building. The flow of people, landscape and urban spaces interconnect and merge with one another. Students are asked to see architecture as a system of flows and not as architectural objects.

2.4.1 ‘Entrance’

One of the major boundaries in relation to the flows and the integration of ‘a building’ in the city is the notion of ‘**entrance**’. The “entrance” is not seen as a mere opening/access from the urban fabric to the spatial entity of the building; rather it is explored as a malleable, major constituent of the proposal, capable of drastically altering through transformations. The interpretation of “approaching” or “entering” is greatly associated to the notion of the urban flow as generator and participant in the town but the building as well, therefore directly linked to our programmatic requirements: Event + Living.

This questioning triggered various approaches: a linear development of the entrance; a network of entrances instead of one; an open public non controlled entrance; entrances organized on other levels even underground instead of the ground floor or even from other plots; inconspicuous entrances that generate a sort of small explorative journey to discover the spatial unexpected qualities and atmospheres. Students managed to integrate the idea of the urban flow with the concept of entering a space by giving it a major importance in the continuation of the urban fabric.

2.4.2 Mobility

The notion of Mobility was triggered in almost all the students' proposals. We believe that the initial questions raised by the issues and notions that the Unit focused on, as well as the ones that appeared through the students' work in the process, were a key catalyst for exploring the idea of Mobility in architecture and the urban environment, having the user as the main protagonist of this exploration.

The understanding of a new urban environment where the main constituent elements are in a flux relationship, where the flows of the town are interwoven with the buildings, the "event + living" amalgamation generates a new flexible relationship. This resilient liaison aims in creating or rather recreating an urban 'living entity' which continuously tends to change in order to follow the constant changing needs of the urban user.

The mobility parameters are further justified and enhanced by the ever increasing shifting from the permanent to the temporary identity of the various factors of the city. Students do not only directly transfer the notion of mobility as actual mobile structures and materials, but reinterpret into the presence of immaterial mobility such as conversion of the spaces by simply inserting different and unexpected activities and/or regenerating different new atmospheres!

The urban temporary character starts taking more significant role than the urban permanence.

THEMATIC

3.1 Innovative Living + Event

The 'living' + 'Event' is tested as a catalyst in order to investigate the main questions of the unit: immaterial matter and its potential role in innovative architecture.

The everyday permanent programme of Living such as social housing, urban (re) development, is generated through an insertion of an Event. We refer to 'Living' as the primary human need for creating architectural spaces. New ways of inhabitation derive from the constant changes in the society and the rapid development of the cities. Students are expected to investigate, explore and invent New Living Typologies simultaneously in 'micro' and 'macro' scale.

Last year students were dealing with living + parallel activities that gave us the chance to discuss about the idea of layering; multiple users; social sustainability; overlapping activities; and diffused boundaries. These parallel activities were seen as a decisive parameter therefore transferred and further enhanced in this current academic year. We clearly define the parallel activity as an Event. The Event can be: permanent or ephemeral; large or small scale; formal or informal; expected or unpredictable.

3.1.1 Temporary and permanent

The juxtaposition of the two diverse programmes Living + Event provokes further discussion on temporary and permanent inhabitation. Scenarios of Temporary inhabitation are generated mainly by the insertion of an Event and occasional is reversed- with living being temporary and the event more permanent.

The focusing on the needs of the user, conspicuous and hidden ones, as well as their integration within the town, urged for new definitions about the programme, temporary and less temporary that led us to define and further establish the significance of the events in the living conditions as a catalyst that generates innovation.

3.2 Field trip – City of London – Olympic site

Aiming at comprehending the significance of the insertion of an event in a contemporary city, a field trip to London was organized. In addition to the expected visit to the Olympic site, the trip was mainly focused on the impact that such an event organization brought to the City of London. Apart from the collateral temporary events and the boosted energy that brings to the city, the regeneration issues of East London, at least as it is intended so far, drew our major attention.

Is the insertion of big or small events with long and short lasting in a city, a parameter that gives a new impact and strongly affects the living conditions in order to meet the changing needs of a new society?

Is it just the triggering quality of the actual event that is deemed of significance importance, such as the impact of the regeneration of East London that was a result of the Olympic Game Event? Or the almost everyday impact that a smaller scale event has in the city can generate more substantial innovations in living trying to meet the contemporary needs of the society ?

These are questions that through the explorations of our Unit's work we try not to directly answer, but to tackle with in diverse ways, or to put basis for further discussions.

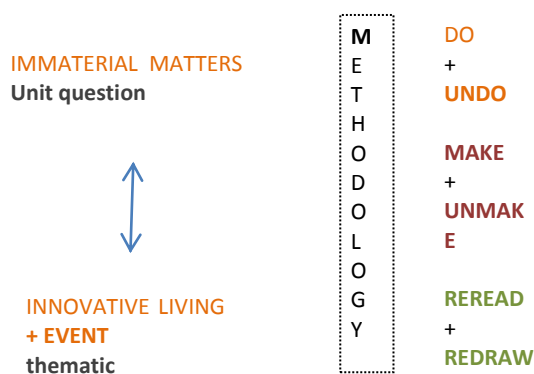
3.3 Social Sensitivity

Throughout the year, the studio was focusing on the social issues, so to develop awareness and sensitivity of the students. Each student was expected to deal with specific groups of people, in a way that they thoroughly understand their needs, and find ways to provide them with innovative living conditions concretely responding to their specificities while integrating them with the community and the town in general. The idea of the 'insertion' of an event helped to achieve this goal and enhance innovative living conditions.

METHODOLOGY

Structure of the Unit

The Methodology of the unit is of equal importance with the research question and the thematic.



Through the act of trial and error we approach architecture as an on-going process. We are interested in the variety of options, and comparative qualities of the different solutions. Our approach is empirical. There isn't one right solution but an investigation of possible scenarios with parallel realities.

Students are expected to: make, remake and unmake physical models; reread and redraw architectural conditions; do and undo as a process of learning. They are expected to be exposed on various media of investigation, experiment, fail and remake what they are working with as a learning process.

This Methodology reflects back to the unit's on-going development, with no predetermined outcomes and fixed projects. The unexpected allows redirection of the process.

Projects

4.2.1 "4 projects in 1 week"

In order to generate, on the one hand a substantial, initial base for discussion and on the other hand a spontaneous, more personal identity, students were guided through a brain storming methodology to start with: one exercise for a day in the length of one week, where the students were expected to reinterpret and reflect on a calligraphy video, a piece of wood, an image of a Noh actor holding a mask and a text, having in mind the Unit's thematic. The four exercises should be seen as unconnected entities, investigating different issues related to the unit's main questions.

Students reinterpreted:

- A. A Calligraphy Japanese video into movement and pause, rhythm, notion of time, moment and sequence, thickness and transparency, voids and mass, fluidity.

- B. Material – a piece of wood: into modules and systems, structural investigations, texture, senses: the feeling of touch, solidity, recycling
- C. an image of the Noh actor holding a mask into skin, in-between spaces, layering, perception
- D. a text from the : “Thinking Architecture”ⁱ p.89 into light conditions, reflexion and shadows, time and immateriality

Evidently, these primary explorations, triggered a fresh energy and creativity that strongly determined and impregnated the following process of the students’ work. The prevention of a strict, straight forward, static methodology and the adaptation of an on-going, ‘living’ process, enhanced the role of Fluidity (not only as an expected outcome but as a major part of the methodology). Hence enabling the course to avoid any predetermined, dead ended results. The significance of this first week’s small projects was revealed during the reviews of the following stages of the Unit, making us realize that all the further developed parts were, in one or other way, injected by the results of the first week.

In order to keep the energy of the brainstorming week glowing during the whole semester, students are constantly given various texts to ‘refresh’ and deepen their understanding. Series of small workshops and meetings with various people, experts in diverse thematics, are arranged in order to develop further parts of the project.

4.2.2 “1 “building” in 2 weeks”

For this project the students were expected to investigate and concentrate on the notion of movement that weaves and defines the entrance, the public and private, the open and close and of course the pause. It was strongly advised not to consider the ‘entrance’ on the ground floor. All the students were expected to integrate the major questions raised through their first ‘exercises’, while dealing with the flows of the town and notion of the access- entrance in their intervention.

A series of readings were given to the students from the book ‘Tarzan in the media Forest’ⁱⁱp.69 ‘Dismantling and reconstructing the ‘House’ in a disordered city’ and p.72 Twenty first century curtains a theory of fluid architecture (1990)

4.2.3 “Living vs. Event in 2 weeks”

The two previous stages were further developed with the insertion of two programmes: ‘Living’ + ‘Event’. These coexisting, contradicting programmes and their relationship is the driving investigation of this project. Students were given a text from the book of Bernard Tschumi “architecture and disjunction”ⁱⁱⁱ in the definition of an “Event”.

The notion of Boundaries seen as Thresholds, as well as the relationship of programmes, time and users had to be intergraded with the previous investigation on urban flows.

The students were required to propose a programme intervention.

Site. In the beginning of the studio work, the students were given a ‘hypothetical’ site with concrete dimensions and restricted, defined conditions in the urban environment of Nicosia, in order to test ideas and develop an approach. All the students were expected to integrate the major questions raised through their first ‘exercises’, while dealing with the flows of the town and notion of the access- entrance in their intervention.

4.2.4 “A moment 1/20 model”

Incessant shifting form macro to micro scales: Through the initial exercises the same results prompted the students to tackle with both the macro and micro scales. Dealing with the notion of flows and accessing, students were expected to deal with the urban conditions seen not as a parameter separate from the proposal but as generating and taking a major participating role in their intervention. In other words they led the urban infrastructure injected into the proposal as protagonist. Simultaneously, and not of a lesser importance there was a continuous testing on smaller scales :students were expected to address the sensory and corporeal needs of human beings, test them in the smaller scales, and re-inform/ alter accordingly the whole intervention, which consequently is transferred to the whole town through the impact that the intervention gives back to

the town. The workshop with models, drawings, collages on scale 1:20 managed to ground the project and enrich the complexity and consummation of the project.

4.2.5 Glossary: Innovative Living Conditions

As a group students had to go through a brain storming discussion in class, and produce a booklet that will be used as a **glossary** on the different ideas of innovative living that are generated by the unit's investigation. Text and diagrams are included parallel to a text description.

Simultaneously with the glossary each individual student was asked to design a living unit based on their user's needs. This unit should give an answer to the question of innovative living! Questions as: How do you approach living? What are the spaces that the user needs? Actual areas of furniture, structures and dimensions were necessary! Students were urged to get into a deeper understanding of living especially in the sense of the continuous change of the contemporary society. They were expected to communicate their ideas by giving emphasis on the 'atmospheres' of the living and its immaterial qualities. A diverse variety of representational means was asked, including their reinterpretation of other case studies.

Through this stage, it was evident that students apart from the above mentioned issues of flows, boundaries etc dealt with issues as flexibility, materiality and sensuality, familiarity and intimacy, senses including smell and hearing, ergonomics, control, vernacular, minimum living requirements, extreme living conditions, rituals, data base, scientific issues, importance of time, patterns, surfaces and human body, in between spaces, virtual spaces, avatar, reformation of nature into living, dream etc.

4.2.6 Real site/ Final project

Having tested and developed a deep understanding, the results were expected to be 'anchored' to specific, physical sites. The students proceeded to a real site where the complexity of the existing conditions is expected to generate further questions and consummate their approach. All the students were expected to consider the event as a major injection to the living conditions in order to generate innovative living conditions. The site and the conditions of its surrounding determined the character of the event and the living conditions, while the outcome of this combination and the expected proposal should have had its impact back to the site.

The students were allowed to choose a site in London, or in Cyprus. The testing of the Living + Event in these completely different towns/ countries is expected to enable the students to understand the significance of the site conditions, the scale issues, the social issues, the climatic conditions etc.

5 CONCLUSION

The Unit's research core investigation, thematic and methodology is seen as an on-going process, which continuously aims to respond to specific questions and as well to set new questions. It tackles with fluidity as an architectural quality that defines both the materiality and immateriality, responds to the innovative living conditions, while at the same time directs the actual Unit's work into always new research horizons.

Generated by a potential collaboration with artists due to the Olympic Games' Event, realised a field trip to London, chose a site in London, currently organising a significant seminar on the 'Sustainable regeneration of Cities' (15.03.2012) together with the British High Commission which will lead to a follow up event and publication in June, the Unit itself is been under a continuous flux activity. Thus, the interaction with the interdisciplinary 'Bodies' triggered bigger and diverse Events leading to new results in the educational approach and Living of the students themselves.

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