

EMERGENCY CASA

CASA stands for Coimbra Architecture Summer Atelier, but also carries a powerful message and meaning behind the four simple letters. In Portuguese, “casa” means house or, in a more colloquial and familiar manner, home. The double meaning brings a playful and light-hearted element to this unique event.

MATTER

Atelier I

Philippe Meier
(meier + associés architectes)
Adriano Reis
(AR2A)
Rafael Eloi
(meier + associés architectes)

PARTICIPANTS
Gabriela Vasconcellos
Gonçalo Queirós
Martim Fernandes
Silas Grandy

GUESTS
Adalberto Dias
Darius Golchan
Jerónimo Botelho
Mariana Pestana

Inhabiting the Urban Landscape

The Surroundings of the Department of Architecture of the University of Coimbra

Philippe Meier

Nothing has to be invented. Everything must be reinvented.

Luigi Snozzi¹

UNDERSTANDING THE PLACE

The starting point of this workshop was the principle that the city of today and tomorrow can only develop on the basis of yesterday's city. The notion of "tabula rasa", or blank page, that modernity sought to create is over. At the beginning of the 21st century, students are confronted with a complex reality that the abstraction of thought alone could not grasp. This is the meaning of the workshop that was conducted for ten days in Coimbra, CASA 2021, on the following theme: "Inhabiting the urban landscape".

The workshop enabled the students to become aware of and adopt a sensitive approach to the urban landscape through the creation of a piece of temporary architecture involving an empty space located behind the Museu da Ciência in Coimbra. If, at the beginning, the aim was to become aware of a notion of territorial insertion, here understood as an "installation" in the landscape of the historic city, the participants quickly realised, while walking up and down the steep slopes of the "Alta", that the theme had to develop and take into consideration a wider territory than the one imagined at the beginning.

This way of looking at developing a site refers as much to geography and land art as to a traditional topo-morphological analysis. It was thanks to several hours spent at the well-known sites of their academic life that the students gradually gained an appreciation of what a reflective approach can offer, as they began to develop a project for the site in question. The following stages were relatively free, but in line with a topical logic and a very contemporary vision: the notion of temporary urbanism linked to the current pandemic, which has been developed in the UK and France, for example in the 'Urban Project Workshops' directed by Ariella Masbouni (Grand Prix de l'Urbanisme 2016). At a time when everything is being questioned by a population that challenges the act of building, this type of approach is certainly a way of continuing to move forward together in terms of urban development.

THE PROBLEMATICS

The idea was to design a temporary pavilion to compensate for the lack of safe interior space during the health crisis, and to envisage the routes leading to this site. It would be a small communal space, supporting the social needs of the user, whether he or she were a resident, a student or simply a passer-by or tourist. The analysis and first sketches showed that a less "formal" approach than the "Monumental Stairs" could make sense, and a more playful, roundabout, scenic route between the lower city and the institutional city, for the benefit of the whole community, was proposed. The students succeeded in highlighting certain relationships between the existing topography, the wall morphology of the old rampart, and the main means of access to this city, whose daytime life is based on academic activity and tourism, but whose disconnection from social

¹ Luigi Snozzi, "For an Architecture of Resistance," in ed. Constantin Spiridonidis & Maria Voyatzaki, *Ten Years of Heads' Meetings: Navigating through the European Higher Architectural Education Area. Transactions on Architectural Education No 41*. (Thessaloniki: EAAE, EANSI, 2008), 29. https://www.eaae.be/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/41_ten-years-of-heads-meetings.pdf

life could be questioned. The project was also a pretext for rethinking urban renewal around existing buildings or structures. Elements such as a low wall or a pavement, a tree or stand of trees, a staircase or a canopy were all elements taken into account.

Such a theme, which deeply engages the young architects of the future, and which has a huge impact on the planet, could not be complete without taking into consideration the choice of building materials necessary to achieve carbon neutrality. As well as being required to describe and write an architectural project, the participants had to learn how to use wood, this ancestral material, the application of which has proved to be effective in navigating the energy transition in recent years. In accordance with the reflection on the site, the choice of wood made sense for a construction that was to be durable yet ephemeral.

METHODOLOGY

Achieving the objectives of this few days' course was made possible by a methodology that guided students both in learning about the site — here understood as a real diagnosis of the landscape's identity — and in conducting research on ways to build differently, with a material that most of them were only then discovering. In order to achieve this, the work with models was particularly highlighted.

It was noted that this collective exercise, with a group of individuals who got along particularly well and who were able to form a close-knit unit with their complementary personalities, succeeded in attaining the goals of the workshop, something any architectural educator would desire. It was thus possible to obtain dynamic research, a sort of small laboratory, the objective of which was to achieve autonomy in the process leading to a project. Despite the difficulties encountered during the contact periods with the teachers, the students managed to meet the demands of the workshop and present sufficient material on which to reflect.

CONCLUSION

The freedom afforded by the open-ended nature of this exercise allowed the students to express themselves on the basis of their own (re)discovery of an environment, however familiar. This was balanced with an appropriate analysis, allowing the theme developed for the site and its content to make sense.

This teaching could not have been as rich and varied as it was without the external contribution of a few guests, who, with their precious knowledge and advice, enlightened the students in their reflections.

First of all, the workshop welcomed Mariana Pestana (The Decorators, Lisbon and London), who outlined an approach to the urban through a medium that borders as much on art as on a form of exploratory sociology, followed by Darius Golchan (ACAU, Geneva), who described an exemplary wooden construction to house migrants near the UN headquarters in Geneva. During the development of the project, the technical expertise of the engineer Jerónimo Botelho (Cerne, Portugal), a specialist in the use of wood, enabled participants to specify the correct dimensions of this material and assemble it appropriately. An intermediate critique by Professor Adalberto Dias (FAUP) concluded these transversal meetings and prepared the students for the final presentation. We would like to thank all the guests for their investment in the training of these young architects of the future.