

Public space design studio – exploring and learning to do a multipurpose design proposal

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Learning public space design intervention requires attention to a variety of social, environmental, ethical and aesthetical issues which rely on a diversity of situations, feelings, opportunities and constraints given by the public outdoor space.

The involvement and participation of the teachers, students, stake holders, decision makers and the users in the learning process is the base of this exercise which culminates in a design output contributing to the enrichment of everyone's knowledge or simply awareness of landscape architecture themes, values and motivations regarding the public space.

The learning process here described occurs during a course unit of the first semester of the master in landscape architecture of the University of Porto, Portugal (September to December). It comprises 6 contact hours per week, for 14 weeks, a class of 20 students, one coordinating teacher, two other participant teachers, guest lecturers, and decision makers at municipality level.

To face the intensiveness of the course and to guarantee some complexity in the outputs, students are guided to work in groups of four; these groups are proposed by the students and tuned up by the teachers. Student's assessment by the teachers is continuous regarding the work and outputs performed along the course unit.

1. The practice starts with a walking tour throughout Porto public spaces, from a central metro station situated up town, down to the historic quarter of the old town, at the river bank. The starting point and the end point are suggested by the teachers, but the students are the ones who organize the route which is indicated and followed in satellite images.

It takes approximately two and a half hours along a wide variety of situations; occasional stops take place in key sites where teachers talk to the students facilitating information, reflections and critique of the public spaces that are being perceived and experienced. Students are constantly stimulated to ask questions, and guided to record information through photos, short videos (including sound recording) and sketches.

2. Back in the classroom, the studio sessions begin. The groups select one of the visited spaces to study in detail and set up a methodology aiming at achieving a spatial proposal for the improvement of public space quality. Such quality improvement is mainly focused on universal public access and movement, ground perviousness, biodiversity, aesthetic interest and visual congruence and sustainable opportunities for trees. Later in the session each group presents and states the reason for choosing their case study.

3. Each group returns to the selected space for a detailed site survey. All relevant data (including historic information, easily available) is recorded and discussed among the group members on site, particularly the most evident problems and opportunities present in the existing situation. More images, sketches and written notes are taken. Students are made aware of the importance of spending time on site, using direct observation, making contact with people passing by and paying attention to aspects such as light, colour, sound, functionality, ambiance, beauty, diversity, coherence, and harmony. The first four are assumed as more objective and the following five accepted as subjective. All can be ranked as either 'high, medium or low'.

4. Again in class the groups work intensively on the production of an intervention programme for their site. The programme must define the main aims and the scope for the intervention, meaning what needs to be done in order to increase the quality of the space. It should therefore highlight: 1) the conservation of existing values and activities which guarantee the character of place; 2) the change of uninteresting aspects and activities of the existing situation; 3) the addition of new features or actions in order to fulfil the aims. The programme narrated in a poster assembled with all sorts of graphic information produced by the students, communicating clear orientation for the following stage of the intervention, which is the previous study.

5. After stabilizing and presenting the intervention programme the groups return to the site and randomly ask users their opinion and expectations about the quality of the place through a simplified open-ended questionnaire (five questions per person; maximum 15 people). The questionnaire concentrates on issues related to access, circulation, seating opportunities, other potential activities, vistas, landform, vegetation, water features, biodiversity and human comfort outside. During this outdoor session people activities and behaviour during day time were also recorded through photographs and behaviour maps.

6. The following studio sessions explore and stabilize the first phase of the design proposal, the schematic design. Here the students synthesize leading goals and ideas in spatial form and materials. The design proposal is formalized in a poster containing a master plan, sections and visualizations. Communication and aesthetic quality of the design elements are assessed, and teachers advise on most effective narratives.

7. An 'open to the community' presentation of the previous study is delivered involving local stakeholders (specific for each site) and municipality decision makers. After presenting the proposals the students



take note of the remarks made by the visiting group, their judgements and suggestions, and debate pros and cons. 'Why questions' are organized and presented by the teachers to the students and to the community members participating in the session. Main conclusions for each group are then recorded.

8. Student groups return to the study space with the master plan and visualizations to ask passing people their opinion about the proposals they produced for the site (minimum 15 individuals, with a well balanced representation of gender and age; five min per person). People's responses are registered to inform the adjustment of the design proposal and meet the expectations.

9. Discussion outcomes and users' opinions are synthesized so that each proposal may progress to a consensus and give way to the second phase of the design proposal, the design development. This project defines the final form and shape of the design proposals and progresses to the detailing of landform, outdoor built structure, vegetation structure and water elements. Implementation costs are estimated, and a final project book is produced highlighting the final design proposal, integrating all the elements that contributed to the design process.

10. Both teachers and students organize and conduct the last assessment session. Such a session is planned to guarantee a ten-minute presentation for each group, followed by questions and answers from the teachers. An initial marking procedure is performed by the students; teachers debate with the students and a consensus is reached for the final mark. Assessment in this course unit is also integrated as a participated learning process.

The facilitation of this course unit creates opportunities for several pedagogical experiments and reflections: 1) spatial design learning with complex multipurpose goals can be satisfactorily achieved with group work, varied studio session exercises, frequent debate, critique and discussion; 2) field work is central for getting to better know the place and allowing more efficient design solutions and decisions; 3) public opinion and the involvement of the stake-holders in the design learning process is fundamental to calibrate the proposal and guarantee realistic outputs; 4) raising students' awareness of the importance of the community involvement in public space design is decisive as a learning process and as design strategy.

The proposed pedagogic framework moves beyond the focus of a specific pre-selected site and predefined programme. By exploring an adaptive spatial design process, students are encouraged to develop a cross-cutting, systems view of the landscape, looking at it from an exploratory point of view, but objectively centred on the integration of environmental, socio-economic and aesthetic perspectives.

We can conclude that the combination and involvement of students, users and stakeholders in the design process enriched the outputs, improved the learning methods, and the deliverance of community participation in the public space design proposals.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

This is not a breakthrough but an ongoing exercise that requires fine tuning and progress assessment of participatory design in public space contexts.

References

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