

# **NEW GROUNDING OF ARCHITECTURAL THINKING.**

**WHAT ARCHITECTURAL STUDENTS SHOULD  
KNOW ABOUT SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES.**

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# SCIENTIFIC AIM

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE WITH STUDENT WORKSHOPS AT THE MSA MÜNSTER SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE / FH MÜNSTER IN OCTOBER 2024

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What Architectural Students Should Know About  
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### **WHAT ARCHITECTURE PUTS INTO FORM DOES NOT BELONG TO ARCHITECTURE.**

Pragmatists – aesthetes and engineers – might answer that for architectural students there would not be much to know about social and cultural issues. Probably, some of them would claim that at best these subjects serve as post-humanist knowledge pools for conversation and the creation of a beneficial sales position.<sup>1</sup> Others, especially professionals, during discussions often hold the opinion that the only way to design and realize “good” architecture is to do so. Therefore, one must concentrate on the core disciplines of the architectural practice, like design, construction, and construction technologies. Yet, it is obvious that this position does not clarify the issue since planners are not necessarily of the same opinion about what “good” architecture would be. They also have different views regarding the building materials and techniques to be used.

Nevertheless, up to the 1980s, one could put forward such views about “good” architecture with some reason. Until then, binding examples could be found in the design principles of the Modern Architecture Movement. However, since the “end of history” was proclaimed half a century ago<sup>2</sup> and since the decline of binding narratives was established<sup>3</sup>, we have been faced with the urgent dilemma of losing the common basis of thought and action.<sup>4</sup> As a reaction, numerous attempts appeared to keep control of the production of architecture and urban planning by (for example)

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<sup>1</sup> This is also the case for urban development projects regarding the international competition of cities, as Charles Landry points out in *The Creative City* (Landry 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Kamper 1988; Flusser 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Lyotard 1979.

<sup>4</sup> See Bürklin 2024, 64–65.

producing a series of atlases, like Atlas of Contemporary World Architecture<sup>5</sup>, Atlas of Urban Planning<sup>6</sup>, Atlas of Piazzas<sup>7</sup>, and Atlas of Digital Architecture<sup>8</sup>. Due to the large number of examples, comprehensive collections should provide a substitute for the loss of shared bases. Likewise, measuring has become fashionable in the absence of recognized parameters of planning. A novel like *Die Vermessung der Welt* (Measuring the World)<sup>9</sup> written by Daniel Kehlmann, was an international bestseller after 2005, in a period of uncertainty when confidence in measuring (the world) meant intellectual reassurance.

The digital conquest of the world has deepened the doubts about the profession. Architects and planners have always used tradition as a treasure trove for their designs. In this context, examples from history serve as distinct pieces extracted from the original design to be modified and integrated into a new one.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in a period of accelerated capitalization of all areas of life during the late 20th century Stuart Ewen already pointed out the fact that history (and likewise social and cultural issues) had lost its (and their) relevance in understanding and interpreting the world.<sup>11</sup> Nowadays, the access to digital resources has simplified this kind of approach to the planning process. Consequently, the question had to arise, due to which criteria digital resources are used, and which combinations of architectural and urban elements may serve in the production of space. The planner's responsibility urges to go beyond mere reflections on beauty.<sup>12</sup> As Henri Lefebvre postulated, every society creates its own spaces.<sup>13</sup> This is the point where social and cultural issues—and despite Ewen's assertion probably also historical reflection—show their very importance. “Good” architecture and “good” urbanism are intertwined with the reflection of the contemporary needs of society.

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5 Phaidon Press 2004.

6 Lampugnani/Stühlinger/Tubbesing (eds.) 2018.

7 Wolfrum (ed.) 2014.

8 Hovestadt/Hirschberg/Fritz (eds.) 2020.

9 Kehlmann 2005 and Kehlmann 2007.

10 This procedure (or method) can already be observed in Andrea Palladio's pragmatism. Howard Burns thus spoke of a „composition kit“, in Burns 2008, 269: “kit compositivo”. See also Bürklin 2019, 83–95 (Palladios Freiheit), and Bürklin 2024, 47–54.

11 Ewen 1988/1999, 258: “As this happens, history disintegrates as a way of comprehending the world; it becomes an incomprehensible catalog display. It shifts from the realm of human subjects engaged in social relations, motivated by interest, circumstance, and experience, to the realm of objects, discrete commodities to be bought and sold.”

12 See Bürklin/Peterek 2021.

13 Lefebvre 2000, 65: “Si chaque société produit un espace, le sien, il s'ensuit encore quelques conséquences.”

This question arises in an even more radical way since artificial intelligence (AI) takes part in (and soon maybe will lead<sup>14</sup>) the process of the design and the organization of societies' spaces. Such a radical change in the profession does not merely push to reflections concerning the authorship or the planners' vanities. Rather, it is about the human world that planners are concerned with. They should raise the question of how this may be preserved or even improved by AI. The developments in the digital field can be taken as a chance for either improvement or deterioration of the human condition. However, the latter must be the decisive factor in deciding how human habitats are to be set up. The reason why architectural students have to deal with social and cultural issues lies in the fact that planning is interwoven with a manifold world that is informed by architecture and urbanism, while at the same time, architecture and urbanism are informed by this world. Or as Umberto Eco wrote: "Instead, what architecture puts into form (a system of social relations, a way of living and being together) does not belong to architecture, [...]"<sup>15</sup>

### **MEASURING THE HORIZON OF ONE'S OWN ACTIONS. ARCHITECTURE AS SCIENCE.**

Therefore, reflecting on social and cultural issues means to acknowledge one's responsibilities versus society.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the central question of the conference will ask which ideological and operational aspects may help to give a solid foundation for architectural and urban planning nowadays. It is about measuring the horizon of one's actions in order to be able to assess the foundation but also the consequences of the same. The challenges due to the climate crisis, digital developments and also questions of (international) cultural and social justice demand this discipline.

The task in architectural education is to re-establish reliable parameters for planning. After having passed the poststructuralist dissolution of traditional values, this cannot mean returning to normative postulates. Thus, the thematic core of the conference is: What can we agree on with convincing reasons? And what grounds should we rely on? In any case, this approach to architecture is based on scientific methods.

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<sup>14</sup> See Wainwright 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Eco 1994/1968, 234: „Invece quello che l'architettura mette in forma (un sistema di relazioni sociali, un modo di abitare e di stare insieme) non appartiene all'architettura, [...]"

<sup>16</sup> See Bürklin 2013, 53.

When debating social and cultural issues the scientific character of the discussion differs from that of natural sciences. Although there are empirical studies concerning social conditions and cultural developments, the aim of the conference is to reflect on the ideological and intellectual foundations of the reflection on architecture, decision-making, and planning. Yet, answers can only be generated by well-founded analyses of the counterpart to be investigated, i.e., by a sound understanding of the developments in the social and cultural world. This alternating relation in an open interpretation is what Gadamer postulated as a central condition of knowledge in the social sciences and the humanities: “The hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things and is always in part so defined. [...]. Rather, a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, in line with Gadamer, the theoretical and pragmatic horizon (of planners) develops alongside the investigation of the subject as a whole: „He, who wants to understand a text always projects.“<sup>18</sup> In this sense, a scientific approach in architecture and urbanism is inevitably linked to a creative interpretation of the world.

## **THE CONFERENCE**

Participants of the conference shall give answers to the question: What Architectural Students Should Know About Social and Cultural Issues. Thus, the reflection must go beyond the (very important) instrumental and technical aspects of architectural production. It also must leave behind mere preoccupations with aesthetics. Since architecture puts into form what does not belong to architecture, the conference is about grounding architectural thinking. Participants shall give solid interpretations (in the scientific manner outlined) of what kind of knowledge is necessary nowadays to create solutions to the problems we are confronted with. Best practice examples will help to illustrate intellectual concepts. In every case, the focus is on how to create intellectual foundations for architectural and urbanistic work. Therefore, the main concern of the conference, What Architectural Students Should Know About Social and Cultural Issues, leads to the fundamental question of how the profession sees itself nowadays. This discussion is necessary in view of the changed living and

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<sup>17</sup> Gadamer 1975/2004, 271. / Germ.: Gadamer 1960/1990, 273: „Die hermeneutische Aufgabe geht von selbst in eine sachliche Fragestellung über und ist von dieser immer schon mitbestimmt. [...]. Wer einen Text verstehen will, ist vielmehr bereit, sich von ihm etwas sagen zu lassen.“

<sup>18</sup> Gadamer 1975/2004, 269. / Germ.: Gadamer 1960/1990, 271: „Wer einen Text verstehen will, vollzieht immer ein Entwerfen.“

working conditions after the times of affluence. We must talk because dwelling – as Heidegger put it in a comprehensive sense affecting all areas of life<sup>19</sup> – is at stake in a social and cultural sense.

The participants of the conference are experts in social and cultural questions regarding architecture and urbanism. Given the worldwide problems, they will reflect ways of collaborative thinking and community-based planning as a fundamental step towards creating livable neighborhoods and cities for all. An important point in this discussion will be the reflection on gender and a social city to create. Since any transformation nowadays must deal with climate change a central focus will lie on how social and cultural reliability of planners—who form space for all and not for the few—can be connected to the reduction of means (of planning, and construction) available. The task is to create an intellectual horizon that allows a positive approach to the present challenges. However, this also means to reflect on the past and where we come from. Without this, the present situation remains in the dark.

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19 Heidegger 1951, 141: “Die Art, wie du bist und ich bin, die Weise, nach der wir Menschen auf der Welt sind, ist das Bauen, das Wohnen.“ / Engl.: Heidegger 1971, 145: „The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is Bauen, dwelling.“

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