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## **IDEA AND FORM: THE INTEGRATION OF HISTORY IN THE DESIGN STUDIO**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The increasing contradiction between “High-Architecture” and “Low-Architecture” that has been made explicit after the bursting of the “Brick-Bubble” calls for a revision of the teaching of design and history. The change in the European education curriculums dictated by the Bologna Process (EHEA) has provided an appropriate context to implement brand new creative subjects, in which history is no longer an isolated subject narrated as facts of the past, but another tool that offers the students a framework to critically engage with the complexity of the built environment. “Idea and Form” is a recently created first-year undergraduate-program subject that interrogates how objects, buildings, cities, and landscapes are shaped focusing on the critical analysis of both their processes of creation and development. “Idea and Form” places its main focus on showing the dialectics between the creative processes and the contingencies of the everyday life, the single-handedly designed projects and the unconsciously and collectively generated realities. Based on historically grounded themes, it offers a clearly understandable theoretical foundation for the development of the different design subjects of the architectural studies curriculum, while challenging the design theories taught in architecture schools until now, primarily focused on the analysis of authored works of architecture.

“To project literally means to throw forward. But in order to throw something forward both thrower and projectile must be behind. Every project is an emissary of the past.”<sup>1</sup>

This paper is going to introduce the contents of “Idea and Form,” a recently created first-year undergraduate-professional program subject taught at the IE School of Architecture in Segovia (Spain), that interrogates how objects, buildings, cities, and landscapes are shaped focusing on the critical analysis of both the processes of creation of works and the generation of realities; the intended architectural projects and the naturally developed contexts, the inspired designs and the common practices.<sup>2</sup> “Idea and Form” is a propaedeutic subject that follows the

structure of the Design Studio and relies on History of the Built Environment as a source in which to trace back all the questions that are posed in the design briefs of the projects. It gathers the preliminary body of creative knowledge that students need to acquire in the first year of an architectural program. And as such, its content is considered foundational. Many class sessions consist on theoretical lectures and discussion seminars of primary sources, but the subject is essentially practical.

“Idea and Form” is structured in a series of core-studio projects of subsequent different scales that deal with real architectural problems. In order to do so, “Idea and Form” integrates the contents of two traditional subjects of the first year of architectural studies –“Analysis of Architectural Forms” (which dealt with formal analysis of works relying on different representation techniques) and “Introduction to Architecture” (which was a basic course of history). And as a novelty “Idea and Form” offers a new method: the creative approach of the Design Studio, in which the biggest emphasis is placed on the analysis of forms-of-construction ready-made by the circumstances of history and human culture. However, the need to propose a small project inspires and structures the contents of the subject.

The context in which this new subject emerges is the material crisis of the world and, more specifically, the bursting of the “Brick-Bubble” in Spain, the model of economic growth based on construction which has led Spanish economy to one of the hardest recessions of the entire European Union. As these pair of images evidence (Fig. 1), up until now, a clear split between two different realities has characterized Spanish architecture’s production. On the one hand, there are the authored works of architecture, which have become singular icons in the field and have had a global impact, but have not always shown sufficient concern for the environments in which they are inserted. On the other hand, there are the usual architectures of the ordinary; the

more invisible works that have been developed in order to respond to more vital needs and which many times have not reached the minimum conditions of inhabitation. Thus, there are two different realms that have developed in parallel tracks, that have received very different degrees of attention, and that have impeded to develop synthetic design responses to the complex problems of the world around. Surprisingly, this impossibility to conceal the two sides has not raised concerns of any kind. And yet today, the series of paralyzed cranes and half-constructed phantom-like housing blocks dispersed throughout our urban fabrics and landscapes have not diminished the international critical acclaim of Spanish Contemporary Architecture.

This critical recognition may have been strengthened by the publication of *El Croquis* (the Spanish journal that primarily focuses on publishing the built work of both established and emerging architects) and did for sure reach its peak on the spring of 2006 when the “On-Site: New Architecture in Spain” Exhibition was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The MoMA presentation revealed the Spanish grounds as particularly appropriate to house museums, auditoriums, convention centers, office buildings, and city halls, designed by both local professionals (i.e. Mansilla y Tuñón, Moneo, Mangado, Ábalos y Herreros) and foreign architects (i.e. Eisenman, Herzog & DeMeuron, Hadid, Koolhaas, etc). But the exhibit did not mention the endless series of low-quality dwelling blocks and single-family homes that were blatantly spreading across the Spanish territory at the time. The number of monographic publications that followed the show only contributed to confirm the partiality of Spanish architecture’s criticism.<sup>3</sup> There was neither a single word spoken nor an isolated image printed that described the dismal background against which all those emblematic works of architecture stood by themselves.

At the moment, the leftovers of the “Brick-Bubble” burst have made impossible to ignore the material aftermath of this critical imbalance: brand-new architectural landmarks spread across

the Spanish different regions live together with massively destructed interior landscapes and Atlantic and Mediterranean coastlines. A material reality that shows us how today, more than ever, a bigger sensibility towards the built environment is needed; a more conscious study of our world around both in its entire banality and uniqueness.

Three years ago, in 2007, when the real-state crisis was already a fact, we realized that our effort for balancing the different degrees of importance given to the two sides of the same reality needed to start with the critical revision of the pedagogical approaches of design education in our architectural schools. This revision would very soon evidence that the existing division in criticism also existed in the academic domain. As a matter of coincidence, the mandatory change in the European education curricula in search for the single and consistent European Higher Education Area (EHEA) dictated by the Bologna Process (1999-2010) provided an appropriate opportunity to review the foundations of the architectural curricula.<sup>4</sup> And the Bologna Process, which –for quality assurance– sought the revision of the bachelor, master, and doctorate programs of the entire European academic system, provided the proper context for the creation of “Idea and Form.”

The first task of this revision was to look at how the creative subjects were taught in the first years of architectural studies. And we realized that emblematic buildings had always been unconditionally exalted –even mystified– as reference case-studies, while the less visible works that truly constitute the framework of our lives had never captured enough attention. We realized that we have been usually reluctant to accept that projects –even masterworks– both take wise moves and produce mistakes; and for this reason we have impeded students to learn from both. And we realized that this is not how we should keep training architects. Catalan architect J. A. Coderch already said forty years ago that “it is not geniuses what we need now.”<sup>5</sup> And following

that attitude, we realized that we need to train architects that are able to learn from, engage with, and solve real architectural problems.

After all real architectural problems have not changed that much over time. Problems such as designing an object, organizing the space of a house, accommodating a new function, are common to the entire History of the Built Environment. And that's why studying the History of the Built Environment is such a particularly useful tool to develop an ability for critical analysis. However, the way we have been taught it until now has not availed us with tools to confront the complexity of architectural problems. Because of its narrative condition, the teaching of history has always relied on the characters of either the created works or the generated realities. And they have been, precisely, the different times of development of these opposed characters –quite concise for the singular works and much more extended and undetermined for the common practices– which have impeded the intended architectural projects and the collectively developed realities to be studied together.

This limitation showed us three years ago that it was necessary to liberate the teaching of history from its dependence on the characters of its narration, and to transform it instead into an operative subject for studio and survey. And the solution could only come from transforming the way the contents were structured, leaving aside both the chronological and the thematic approaches, and relying instead on the open-flexible framework of the Design Studio. In this new context, the design briefs of the projects would be able to pose real architectural problems and to create a natural structure –a non-linear, non-chronological framework– for the development of the teaching of history.

Thanks to the integration of the structure of the Design Studio and the contents of History of the Built Environment, “Idea and Form” is now a new space in which students can confront the

contradictory and complex realities of real and contemporary contexts, they can look beyond the objects and carefully study the processes that generated the architectural forms considering all the agents, and can understand both projects designed single-handedly and collectively generated realities as different parts of the same world. In “Idea and Form” the two conflicting sides of the realities around are approached together in a number of core-studio projects developed in subsequent scales that run from the artifacts of domestic spaces to the anonymous constructions spread across the landscape, from the most proximate to the most distant to us. By means of small projects of transformation, students are able to learn how to merge the representative with the intimate, and how to respond to both aesthetical and daily matters.

The different intentions of our series of exercises are, among others, to reflect on the material, functional, and signifying qualities of the everyday objects, as well as the dialog that can emerge among them when they are laid together in a concrete space; a room, also charged with meaning, that can be thoroughly analyzed in order to understand the non-formal relationships that constitute the measure of our lives (Fig. 2). We look at several quotidian scenes of different times and reflect on the artifacts that have become essential to us not for being endowed by a specific design, but for their use over time. We specially distinguish between contemporary designed objects and those others that have reached to us after a long tradition of evolutionary advancement. And we reflect on the potential changes of status of the objects. The goal is to show how by a small change of context objects that were originally created to merely serve a function can be always de-naturalized.

We are also especially interested in trying to understand how life is incorporated into architecture; what the signs of occupancy of a space are (Fig. 3). And we reflect on the experience of inhabitation and on the symbolic weight of the elements that compose the immediate

environment of a house. We look at atmospheres that may be found in the world around and may anticipate some actions, trying to figure out how different elements could be incorporated in this kind of settings over time. In doing so, we are especially attracted in revealing how a good environment may probably be the result of a slow accumulation of chosen objects, which may inevitably shape the frames of our lives.

Then, beyond the artifacts and pieces of furniture that may foster activity, we also look at the spatial structures of the buildings that compose the urban fabric of our cities, which have been collectively generated over time (Fig. 4). We reflect on the multiplicity and diversity of interventions that are piled up in dense constructions and we try to define different kinds of systems of flexibility that would allow for very different uses of similar spaces. We are interested in studying the transparency of architecture; the way different lives and phenomenological realities are usually concealed behind the apparent homogeneity of every facade.

And taking the last step on these series of subsequent scales, we also look at available buildings that carry with them a potential move from their status: ideological buildings created by single authors that come from a particular political time or historical containers of the industrial heritage designed by “good clean form-givers”<sup>6</sup> that belong to the world of the silent structures of the ordinary (Fig. 5). We learn how new programs can “re-aestheticize” found constructions and how they can radically change the cultural landscape of a place. By working with these examples, we are also interested in showing how given forms, whether monumentalizing or de-monumentalizing them, can always be successfully re-inserted in the contemporary built environment.

Two years of academic teaching of “Idea and Form” have demonstrated how much the teaching of the History of the Built Environment and the Design Studio mutually benefit from



each other. The aesthetic transformations from the everyday to the representative can only happen in the context of the Design Studio, while the thorough analysis of the given conditions can only be done by carefully studying the History of the Built Environment. Both of them show us that the distinction between “High-Architecture” and “Low-Architecture” should be constantly negotiated, and that both the individual architectures and the communal enterprises play an equally important role in the shaping of our built environments.

“Idea and Form” avails the students with the foundational knowledge to continue their architectural studies curriculum. It is the first step to enhance their social responsibility in the construction of the built environment.

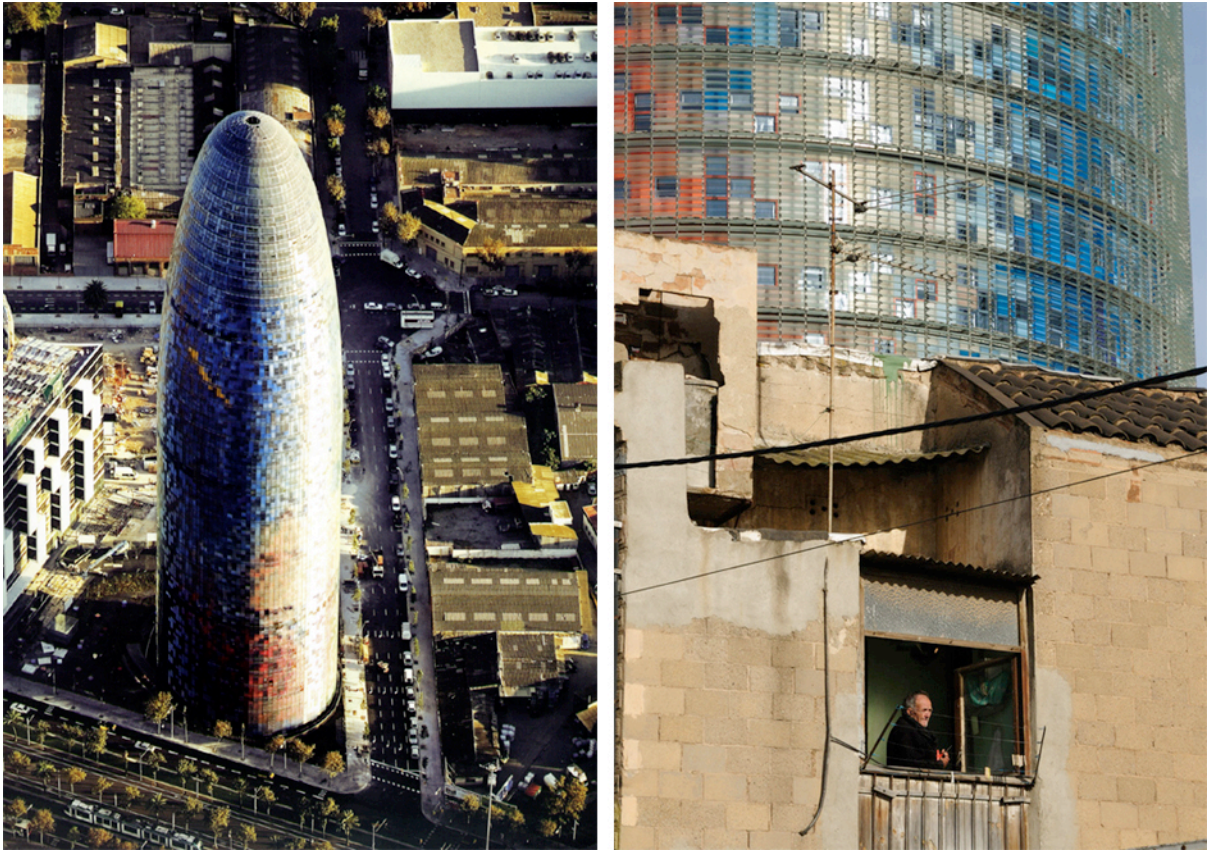


Fig. 1. Jean Nouvel, Agbar Tower, Aerial view of the surrounding environment  
Anonymous constructions at the foot of the Agbar Tower © Fran Simó, justpictures



Fig. 2. Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*, 1658-1661  
Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 41 cm, The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Fig. 3. John Singer Sargent, *The daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, c1882  
Oil on canvas, 221.93 x 222.57 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Fig. 4. Edmund Collein, *Erweiterung des Prellerhauses* (*Extension to the Prellerhaus*), 1928  
Cut-and-pasted photographs, photomechanical reproductions, 41.5 x 55 cm, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin



Fig. 5. Bernd Becher, *Water Towers*, 1972-1998  
Vitry-le-Francois, Büchen, Diepholz, Volkmarsen, Liège, Rodange, La Combelle, Kaiserslautern,  
Hohnstädt

## NOTES AND REFERERNCES

This paper has been developed during my professorship in IE University.

1. Josep Quetglas, *Fear of Glass: Mies van der Rohe's pavilion in Barcelona* (Basel and Boston: Birkhäuser-Publishers for Architecture, c2001).
2. This subject is part of the curriculum of the Bachelor in Architecture program that is being taught both in English and in Spanish at the IE School of Architecture in Segovia since September 2008. The contents of "Idea and Form" was generated with Adjunct Professor Ignacio Moreno, who teaches at the Spanish program. This paper has benefited from the many discussions that we had during these two years. I am especially grateful for his insightful comments.
3. Among other publications the most important ones are: Terence Riley, *On-Site. New Architecture in Spain* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005); Terence Riley, *On-Site. Arquitectura en España Hoy* (Madrid: PromoMadrid, 2006); *Spain Builds*, AV Monografias 113 (2005); *La lista del MoMA*, Arquitectura Viva 104 (2005).
4. <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/Bologna/>  
[http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc1290\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc1290_en.htm)
5. Josep Antonio Coderch, "No son genios lo que necesitamos ahora," in *Domus* (November 1961).
6. Reyner Banham had used the term "good clean form-givers" to describe the design attitude of the farmers and the engineers which Adolf Loos described in his text "Architecture." (1910). See Banham, "Ornament and Crime: The Decisive Contribution of Adolf Loos," in *A Critic Writes*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 17.