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ALICANTE \* 19/20/21/22 SEPTEMBER 2018

**CONGRESS PROCEEDINGS**

EURAU18 alicante  
RETROACTIVE RESEARCH  
**CONGRESS PROCEEDINGS**

ISBN: 978-84-1302-003-7  
DOI: 10.14198/EURAU18alicante

Editor: Javier Sánchez Merina  
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**Titulación de Arquitectura**

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# The City as a Studio

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Architectural Education through Bodily Experience

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## Synopsis

Architectural knowledge has a dynamic character and can be discovered collectively during architectural education. The place of this discovery and production process can be considered as the “studio” and this studio doesn’t have to be limited in a building. To extend the limits of the studio to city scale creates new opportunities both for the students and the locals. Visiting different parts of the city and converting those places into a studio triggers encounters. Every encounter is a creative and productive act. As a course of its nature, the city is the place of confrontations and encounters. Being, producing and discussing in the city creates an atmosphere where intellectual, imaginative and creative encounters emerge. This emergence can be considered as a flash-mob. Flash-mobs demonstrate the power of bodily experience and highlights the importance of performativity. Each student constructs a mental and muscle memory by his/her own bodily experience during the studio hours in the city. This experience let us to create an extra curriculum such as historical, socio-economical, natural and cultural aspects and everyday life practices of the place. In this paper, I would like to discuss my way of teaching as a retroactive research. I prefer to use the city – Istanbul – as a studio and visit different parts of it for my courses. In this way, an architectural course turns into a retroactive research based on bodily experience. Each event of perception opens up to its own world and the world of perception is merged with the real world itself. When you use the city as a studio, the dynamic character of architectural knowledge unfolds itself and extends its content. In this critical pedagogy, architectural education becomes interactive between the city users and the students and transforms both of them.

**Key words:** Architectural education, architectural studio, bodily experience, encounters, atmosphere.

## 1. The City as a Studio: Architectural Education through Bodily Experience

The architectural knowledge is not fixed. It can't be learned merely by reading certain books and studying particular subjects. Instead, it has a dynamic character that is open to change and suitable for collaborative production. The production of architectural knowledge is a collective process in which both the professor and the students take an active role.

In this context, the place of the production of architectural knowledge – that I call “studio” – gains a significant importance. The studio is not a physical space like a classroom in a school, but rather an atmosphere<sup>1</sup> where intellectual, imaginative and creative encounters<sup>2</sup> emerge. In order to increase the amount of encounters, the limits of this atmosphere can be extended to city scale (Fig. 1).

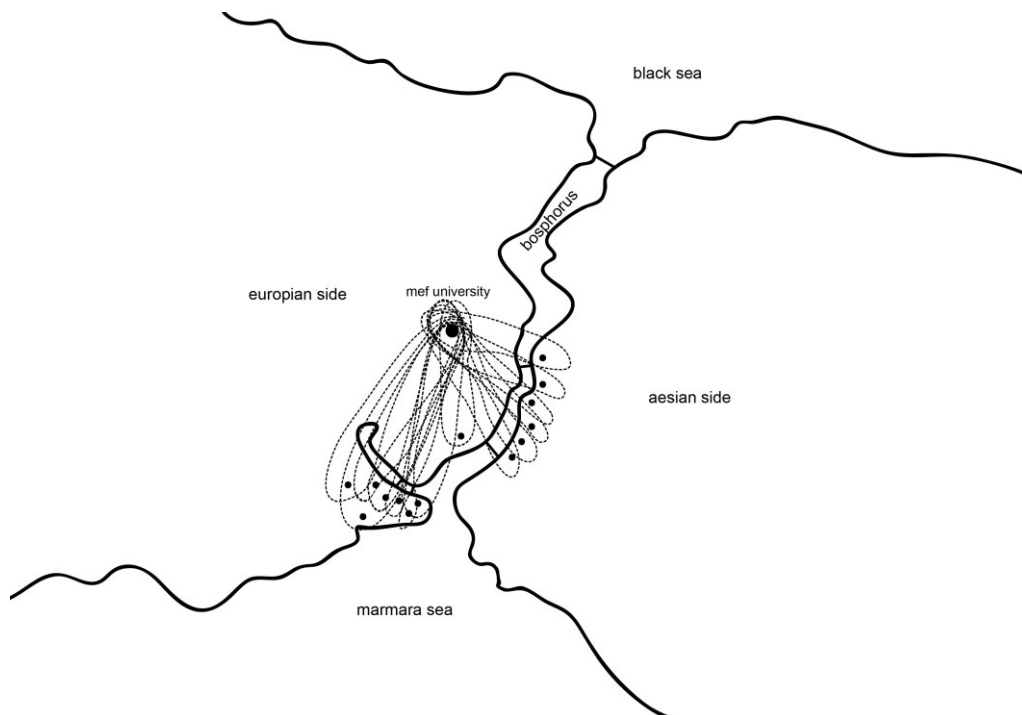


Figure 1. The city as a studio: The extended borders of the university, Ozan Avci, 2018.

The city has multiple layers such as physical, natural, cultural, social and itself is the place of confrontations and encounters. All of these layers are folded and can be unfold by bodily experience<sup>3</sup>. Using the city as a studio means not only going there but also being there. Field trips, site-seeings and excursions are based on going there as a kind of tourist. Producing there through active bodily experience converts this practice into being there rather than merely going there and considers the city as a studio (Fig. 2). This productive process triggers encounters, like a flash mob. In a flash mob, a group of people gathers suddenly in a public place and perform an unusual act for a certain time period, then disperse

<sup>1</sup> Peter Zumthor explains the quality of architecture through atmosphere in his book “Atmospheres” in 2006. According to him atmosphere is the reason when a building manages to move us. We perceive atmosphere through our emotional sensibility. Atmosphere triggers the sensation and plays a significant role during the bodily experience. When I assume the city as studio and the studio as an atmosphere, I also would like to emphasize its role in producing knowledge in architectural education through bodily experience

<sup>2</sup> Rollo May argues that every encounter is a creative act in his book “The Courage to Create”

<sup>3</sup> Here I would like to recall the thoughts of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and stress the importance of phenomenology in architecture



quickly. This performative<sup>4</sup> act attracts the attention of the public, redefines the public space and makes people to rethink about the limits of public space and the dynamics of everyday life practices (Fig. 3). Flash mobs demonstrate the power of bodily performance on the transformation of public space into another spatial mood, such as a studio, an atmosphere.



Figure 2. The coffee house as a studio, Ozan Avci, 2018.



Figure 3. Aksaray square as a studio, Ozan Avci, 2018.

In this paper, I would like to discuss my way of teaching as a retroactive research. I prefer to use the city – Istanbul – as a studio and visit different parts of it for my courses. Istanbul is a multi-layered metropolis. Because of its large scale, every Istanbuler has his/her own everyday life circle in it. Visiting various neighbourhoods of Istanbul extends the perception of the city in each students' mind. Each visit includes an active production process, such as drawing, mapping, model making, video shooting and discussing on site. We convert a square, a street, a market place, a mosque, a church or a coffee shop into an architectural studio (Fig. 4). We meet there, discuss there and produce there (Fig. 5).

<sup>4</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte describes the etymology of the Word “performative” and emphasizes the importance of “to perform” and “to act” so as to create an aesthetic experience in her book “Aesthetik des Performativen” in 2004



Figure 4. Cibali as a studio, Ozan Avci, 2018.



Figure 5. A street in Balat as a studio, Ozan Avci, 2018.

During this process, we encounter different locals and experience various topographical, social and cultural practices. Every encounter not only affects my students but also the people there. Our presence acts like a flash mob and takes the attraction of the people. They observe how we use the space, change the borders between public and private spaces and what we produce. This encounter creates a great interest and starts a dialogue between the locals and us (Fig. 6). Each dialogue is an expression of the self, for both sides, and unfolds the social and cultural layers spontaneously.



Figure 6. Koprulu Mehmet Pasa Mederesesi as a studio, Ozan Avci, 2018.

Besides unfolding social and cultural layers, bodily experience helps to explore the physical, topographical characteristics of the city. Being on the Bosphorus (Fig. 7), walking<sup>5</sup> on the streets of historical peninsula or moving around the hills of Istanbul creates totally different experiences. Each part of Istanbul has a diversified relation with the body and this variegation reveals various perceptions and sensations. Experiencing the city by your own body also creates a muscle memory<sup>6</sup> that you remember more than a theoretical

<sup>5</sup> In his books "In Praise of Walking" and "Sensing the World" David le Breton highlights the importance of walking as a bodily experience in order to trigger various sensations of a place

<sup>6</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa talks about the importance of drawing by hand in his book "The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture



knowledge. Even though we go there to draw something or make a model, etc., we have the chance to talk about what we see there and from there, the history and socio-economic, natural and cultural characteristics of the place (Fig. 8). This is an extra knowledge that we produce through discussions on site.



Figure 7. Walking along the Bosphorus, Ozan Avci, 2018.



Figure 8. Samatya square and Macka park as a studio, Ozan Avci, 2018.

During these discussions it is possible to have contributions from the locals. By this way, the talk and discussion become a free lecture for everybody. The city acts like an open platform to share knowledge and to gather around (Fig. 9). During that studio hours, there is no “other” and everybody that is sharing those moments become one. This performative act helps us to break the social and cultural borders and gives us a chance to know each other (Fig. 10).



Figure 9. Sultanahmet square as a studio, Ozan Avci, 2018.

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and the Senses” in 2005 and draws attention to the muscle memory and says “The body knows and remembers (p.60)”



Figure 10. The Grand Bazaar as a studio, Ozan Avcı, 2018.

In this way, an architectural course turns into a retroactive research based on bodily experience. Experience is a flow of time-space relations that are intertwined with perception and sensation. Each event of perception opens up to its own world and the world of perception is merged with the real world itself. When you use the city as a studio, the dynamic character of architectural knowledge unfolds itself and extends its content. In this critical pedagogy, architectural education becomes interactive between the city users and the students and transforms both of them.

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## Biography

**Ozan Avci.** After graduated from I.T.U. Faculty of Architecture Department of Architecture with the 3rd degree in 2005, he had started his Master's in Architectural Design Programme at I.T.U. During his MSci, he had been to Brandenburg Technical University (BTU-Cottbus) as an Erasmus student between 2006-2007. In 2008, he was enrolled in Architectural Design Phd Programme at I.T.U. and completed his PhD in 2016. He was a visiting scholar as a Fulbrighter at University of Pennsylvania (U-Penn) School of Design for 2013-14 academic year in U.S.A. Between 2005 and 2017, he worked as a research assistant at ITU Faculty of Architecture Department of Architecture. Since 2017, he has been working as an Assistant Prof. at MEF University Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture Department of Architecture. His research interests are body-space-time relations, bodily experience, representation theories and methods, the relation between representation and sensation, and the interaction between fashion design and architecture.