

A lesson in trust: what can we build together when architecture is no longer just for architects

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Received: September 20, 2025

Accepted for publication: October 6, 2025

Abstract

Trust in the built environment grows not only from good design but also from people’s ability to understand and influence how spaces are made. This paper explores how architectural education for non-architects can become a foundation for building trust and collaboration between professionals and communities. It examines three types of initiatives: school programs, public festivals, and community workshops, showing how each makes design processes visible and accessible. These are interpreted through a four-step framework: demystification, visibility, involvement, and reflexivity. This paper argues that trust emerges when architectural language is opened and communities are invited to participate, not just be consulted. To strengthen empirical grounding, the study discusses outcomes such as children’s increased spatial awareness, public dialogue around professional choices, and tangible results in workshops. The analysis is complemented with insights from international contexts. By offering both a theoretical framework and practical recommendations, this paper positions architectural education as civic literacy: a pathway toward becoming trustworthy in the eyes of communities.

Keywords: Architecture, Trust, Architectural Education, Civic Literacy, Participatory Design

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Introduction

Trust is one of the most fragile resources in contemporary society. Surveys across Europe repeatedly show that citizens tend to mistrust institutions, including those shaping the spaces they inhabit. Architecture, while central to collective well-being, often suffers from being perceived as distant, inaccessible, or even imposed. People rarely see how decisions are made, what trade-offs are involved, or how their voices could matter. Without transparency and participation, mistrust grows.

In this context, the challenge is not only to design well but to become trustworthy, to open processes, share vocabulary, and invite dialogue. Architectural education, whether formal or informal, offers a critical entry point. By explaining how spaces work, by demystifying professional language, and by making design processes visible, education transforms architecture into a common ground for collaboration.

The rationale of this paper is grounded in the idea that trust in the built environment cannot be assumed; it must be cultivated. Architectural language and practices often remain locked within professional circles, excluding those most affected by design decisions. Education for non-architects therefore becomes a key tool for civic literacy, enabling people to engage critically, to ask informed questions, and to co-create the environments they share.

The aim is to explore how architectural and spatial education can strengthen trust and collaboration. The guiding questions are:

- How can architectural education contribute to building trust in the built environment?
- What kinds of non-formal or informal learning practices effectively bridge the gap between architects and non-architects?

- How does opening knowledge reshape people's relationship with space?
- How can these practices adapt to diverse contexts, from schools to festivals and local initiatives?

This paper is structured as follows: a review of literature on trust, participation, and architectural education; a methodology combining desk research and case analysis; and three examples that illustrate how knowledge sharing can support collaboration. The discussion interprets these cases through the four-step framework mentioned above, and the conclusions reflect broader implications.

The contribution of this study lies in proposing a simple yet adaptable framework for trust building through architectural education, completed by concrete examples from Romania and international references. By connecting theory, practice, and community engagement, the paper argues that architectural education should be understood as an infrastructure of convergence: a civic resource for becoming trustworthy in the eyes of society.

Literature Review

Studies across urban design and sociology highlight that trust is a fundamental condition for resilient and connected communities (Carmona, 2021; Ghel, 2012). In the built environment, trust does not derive solely from technical standards or aesthetic qualities, but from how people experience, understand, and participate in shaping their everyday spaces. Public spaces support social interaction, identity, and well-being (Carmona, 2021; Ghel 2012; Jacobs, 1961). When these qualities are absent, or when communities are excluded from understanding and influencing the design of their surroundings, skepticism toward professionals and institutions increases (Alexander,

1986; Montgomery, 2013). Vibrant, trustworthy places are not imposed top-down but co-created with those who inhabit them, reinforcing a sense of shared responsibility.

Research on participatory design and community planning confirms that collaboration builds trust between architects and the users of their designs (Sanoff, 2002; Blundell, Jones, Petrescu & Till, 2005). Arnstein's (1969) influential Ladder of Citizen Participation illustrates how levels of involvement range from manipulation to genuine partnership, showing that trust grows when participation moves beyond consulting toward shared decision making. Participatory methods, such as community workshops, co-design sessions, or design charrettes, can demystify architectural language, making it more accessible to non-experts while empowering communities to articulate needs and preferences (Sanoff, 2000). Yet participation is not without risks: if poorly managed, it can slow down the design process, dilute professional expertise, or create unrealistic expectations. More critically, superficial involvement may reinforce mistrust if communities feel their contributions are tokenized or ignored. Thus, meaningful participation should be transparent, continuous, and adapted to context.

Education provides a way to balance these tensions. De Botton (2009) reminds us that architecture influences how we feel and live, yet it often remains invisible in everyday life until it fails us. Dewey (1972) and Freire (1970) argue that democracy requires education that fosters critical thinking and agency. Applied to the built environment this suggests that architectural knowledge should circulate widely, beyond professional circles. When citizens understand design principles, they acquire a shared vocabulary to question, adapt, and take responsibility for their environments. Empirical research reinforces this: Ghaziani (2012) shows that when children's voices are included in school design, those spaces work better for learning. In

Romania, programs such as De-a arhitectura adapt this idea for primary schools, helping children and teachers develop confidence in discussing buildings and their cities, and see themselves as active users rather than passive spectators (Sava et al, 2016).



Fig 1 Participatory workshop

International examples reinforce the value of extending architectural education beyond the profession. In Finland, the Arkki School of Architecture for Children and Youth has, since 1993, offered extracurricular programs that introduce children to design and spatial thinking. Supported by the Ministry of Education and partnerships with construction-related industries, Arkki has expanded internationally and demonstrates how early education can cultivate long-term civic literacy. In Denmark, The Danish Architecture Center in Copenhagen functions as a public-private partnership, founded by the state, the municipality, and the philanthropic foundation Realdania, whose resources come directly from the construction sector. DAC combines exhibitions, workshops, and research programs to engage citizens of all ages in architectural culture, showing how collaboration between academia, government, and industry can strengthen public trust. In the Netherlands, the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam operates not only as an exhibition but as an interdisciplinary laboratory where architects, policy makers, and local communities work together on pressing issues such as

climate adaptation and urban resilience. Its hybrid funding model, drawing on both institutional and private sponsors, illustrates how architecture can be turned into a national conversation.

Taken together, these studies suggest that trust emerges when architecture becomes visible, participatory, and accessible through education. Traditional models of architectural education, focused narrowly on professional training, risk isolating knowledge from the very public it ultimately serves. By contrast, approaches that open architectural language, processes, and promises create opportunities for communities to engage critically and constructively.

Methodology

This qualitative, multiple-case design examines how architectural education for non-architects can build trust. Cases were previously selected to capture variation in scale, audience and format, and to ensure traceable documentation: (1) a school-based program introducing architecture to primary education (De-a arhitectura), (2) a public festival combining debates, exhibitions, participatory design and city tours (FAST - Festival for Architecture Schools of Tomorrow), and (3) small-scale community workshops in urban and rural settings (neighborhood walks, mapping, model-making). Selection criteria included: explicit educational intent beyond the profession; structured opportunities for public interaction with design processes; evidence that participants could voice concerns and influence outcomes; and accessible records (curricula, agendas, reports, feedback forms, media coverage).

Data sources combined desk research with practice-based materials: published literature; program artifacts (syllabi, activity briefs, exhibition texts, workshop agendas); publicly available documents (webpages, reports, press materials); anonymized participant feedback where

available; and observational notes from public sessions. Where programs provided attendance figures or feedback summaries, these were recorded as contextual indicators, not as the basis for casual claims.

Analysis proceeded in two steps. First, a structured reading of each case identified instances where design knowledge was made legible and where participants could intervene meaningfully. Second, cross-case synthesis applied a four-step lens to compare patterns and enabling conditions (facilitation style, time allocation, materials, venue). Trust-building was operationalized through converging signs: (i) comprehension (participants restating constraints/options), (ii) willingness to engage (repeat attendance, sustained Q&A, reduced adversarial language), (iii) perceived legitimacy, (iv) shared decisions (documented changes, adopted priorities), and (v) transparency cues (explicit acknowledgment of trade-offs). These indicators were read comparatively rather than as metrics. Triangulation across heterogeneous sources reduced single-source bias; analytic memos documented coding decisions.

Results

Case 1: School program: De-a arhitectura (Romania).

De-a arhitectura introduces architecture to primary schools through year-long courses co-developed by architects and teachers. Demystification occurs through playful assignments that translate concepts as scale, function, and circulation into drawings and models; visibility is achieved by showing how buildings and cities are assembled; involvement takes the form of pupils proposing classroom or neighborhood redesigns; reflexivity appears in class exhibitions and feedback sessions where proposals are refined collectively. Outcomes include increased spatial awareness and greater confidence in

expressing views on the environment, suggesting early trust that architecture is open to participation even when proposals are not directly implemented.

Case 2: Public festival: FAST - Festival for Architecture Schools of Tomorrow, Romania

FAST combines conferences, exhibitions, and tours for mixed audiences. Expert talks are paired with accessible displays and workshops (demystification), process materials show intermediate stages and trade-offs (visibility), open forums invite citizens questions that can redirect discussion (involvement), and catalogues/recordings document how public input shaped debates (reflexivity). Outcomes include repeat attendance across festival days or even editions, media framing architecture as civic issue, and first-time engagement from non-architects, showing of growing legitimacy for the profession.

Case 3: Community workshops - Local initiatives

Neighborhood mapping, co-design sessions, and hands-on prototyping provide immediate participation. Facilitators explain tools in accessible terms (demystification); site walks make local problems visible; residents co-produce proposals and prioritize interventions (involvement); debriefs and follow-up meetings track whether input is incorporated (reflexivity). Outcomes include stronger local networks, shared vocabulary for discussing space, and small but tangible improvements (e.g. temporary seating, safer crossings) where authorities followed up.

Cross-case patterns

Across cases, trust is initiated when knowledge is demystified, consolidated when processes are made visible, expanded through meaningful involvement, and reinforced through reflexivity. Educational formats thus function as civic infrastructure: they build

trust not by persuasion but by opening processes, legitimizing voices, and modeling collaboration.

Initiative	Who it reaches	How it builds trust
De-a arhitectura (school program)	Children, teachers	Early awareness, simple vocabulary, curiosity to ask questions
FAST festival (public event)	General public, students	Open dialogue, explanations from professionals, shared discussions
Local workshops	Residents, community groups	Hands-on work, direct negotiation of ideas, visible outcomes

Table 1 Examples of architectural education formats and how they foster trust



Fig. 2 FAST - Festival for Architecture Schools of Tomorrow 2nd edition

Discussion

Findings indicate that education-centered formats can convert architectural practice into a trustworthy civic process, provided they open the backstage of design rather than showcase finished products. Accessible vocabulary and visibility supply the conditions for participation to move beyond symbolism; involvement creates agency; reflexivity closes the loop by acknowledging contributions and adjusting course. This echoes Dewey and Freire's emphasis on agency and aligns with Jacobs's insistence on everyday experience as a source of urban knowledge, while also acknowledging the literature's caution that poorly designed participation can backfire.

Taken together, these mechanisms reframe architectural education as civic literacy, not just as professional training. Traditional models of education, which focus on producing competent architects, are insufficient if the wider public remains excluded from the very knowledge that shapes their everyday environment. By contrast, convergent practices connecting schools, festivals, and community workshops demonstrate that education can cultivate legitimacy and trust at multiple scales.

International precedents (Arkki, DAC, IABR) demonstrate that when academia, government, and industry co-invest in public oriented education, architecture becomes legible at scale. The Romanian cases suggest similar potential: when design knowledge circulates widely, citizens are more inclined to see architects as partners. Ultimately, becoming trustworthy requires technical competence and ethical transparency: sharing trade-offs, uncertainties, and real choices, and creating spaces where communities test, question, and reshape ideas.

Conclusion

The paper shows that trust in the built environment grows from processes that are open, legible, and responsive. The four-step framework – demystification, visibility, involvement and reflexivity – offers a practical lens for designing such processes across schools, festivals, and workshops. Three implications follow (1) complement professional training with public-oriented education; (2) treat trust as the outcome of transparent practices rather than a by-product of competence; and (3) leverage convergence across institutions to widen impact. While exploratory and limited in scope, the study argues that architectural education is central to the profession's legitimacy: a civic resource for becoming trustworthy in the eyes of society.

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O lecție despre încredere: ce putem construi împreună când arhitectura nu mai este doar pentru arhitecți

(rezumat)

Încrederea în mediul construit nu crește doar din design de calitate, ci și din capacitatea oamenilor de a înțelege și influența modul în care sunt create spațiile. Această lucrare explorează modul în care educația arhitecturală pentru non-arhitecți poate deveni o fundație pentru construirea încrederii și colaborării între profesioniști și comunități. Sunt analizate trei tipuri de inițiative: programe școlare, festivaluri publice și ateliere comunitare, arătând cum fiecare face procesele de design vizibile și accesibile. Acestea sunt interpretate printr-un cadru în patru pași: demistificare, vizibilitate, implicare și reflexivitate. Lucrarea susține că încrederea apare atunci când limbajul arhitectural este deschis, iar comunitățile sunt invitate să participe, nu doar să fie consultate. Pentru a consolida fundamentul empiric, studiul discută rezultate precum conștientizarea spațială sporită a copiilor, dialogul public în jurul alegerilor profesionale și rezultatele tangibile din ateliere. Analiza este completată cu perspective din contexte internaționale. Oferind atât un cadru teoretic, cât și recomandări practice, această lucrare poziționează educația arhitecturală ca o formă de alfabetizare civică: o cale către câștigarea încrederii în ochii comunităților.