

The faculty within the architecture of Iași

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Abstract

The growth and dissolution of our built environment and architectures is, perhaps, a vivid representation of how memory functions, preserving most of what stands the challenge of time and “forgetting”, sometimes in a natural manner, sometimes altered by trauma and sometimes fuelled by the lack of understanding, appropriation and connection with the users’ culture and knowledge. The ever-more divided world today reflects in a landscape of architecture lacking, at times, semantic coherence and connection to a broader paradigm. Of course, the visionary endeavor and experiment is mostly an unintended exercise within the design tasks of a Faculty of Architecture, serving mostly as a more or less defined urban, historic urban structure. Yet, every Faculty of Architecture, through hosting its projects within its city, intrinsically showcases a museum of possibilities, a testing laboratory of visions, confronting discourses, aesthetic directions, meanings and attitudes towards the existent, formulating the grounds for its particular architectural and urban hermeneutics. In a world divided to the extent of ideological fractures today, working on the project of a coherent, empowering and relevant city renders the Faculty of Architecture as a platform for building trust and collaboration.

Keywords: repository, consciousness, cultural sustainability

Introduction

The most prominent aspects of the public discourse today reflect divisions across various dimensions, ranging from political ideologies, economic disparities and cultural differences. Paradoxically, technological advancement challenges existing inequalities, deepening fractures in terms of opportunity and access and even sets the grounds for distrust, disbelief and alienation from human values. The emergent AI world constantly finds itself in the role of an apparatus meant to create deceitful information, meant to appeal to emotion in a manipulative and altering manner. In the endeavor of a worldwide connection between humans through digital means, the exact humane quality of the process appears to be lacking. In the wake of a questionable, volatile and ever-de-humanizing virtual era, the need for consistent cultural landmarks and human values are of the utmost importance. Setting the grounds and the premises for such a project of reevaluation and reconciliation of human values bears the romantic dimension of rebuilding the metaphorical forum of collective memory.

Perhaps today, more than ever, humanity has lost its knowledge of building such a memory forum. It is here where architectural education may be regarded as a mechanism for rebuilding trust in the citadel. In a less poetic wording, architecture, in its build and pedagogic form, constitutes a means of rebuilding trust between institutions and citizens, between communities, disciplines, between past and future urban visions. A city hosting a faculty of architecture is inherently a place of vision production, as plots which students work upon during student years mostly rely on places which are accessible. This facilitates and enhances their research with the experiencing of live observations and personal rapports with the particularities of a place. In situ experimentation of sites, architecture, places and spaces is a key process in consolidating mental equations between the form, the void and its impact on human perceptions. Having established this preliminary vocabulary, memory and perception, further on, constitute a means of building knowledge on rapports with places, continuously mediating between matter and consciousness. If the built

environment of a place acts as the means of transcending from geometry to cultural history, one's place's Faculty of Architecture becomes the key to operating the available physical means. Perhaps it is here, juxtaposing the built environment with the discourses of architecture, one may understand better how vision is conjugated in what is built, between the school of thought and its becoming. The school of architecture becomes the fertile land for cultivating visions and growing a personal *Ars Poetica* of architecture.

The particularities of the city of Iași are strongly connected to its metaphorical birth certificate, which claims its identity of a city located at the crossroads between two commercial roads. The obvious need of continuous "display" space raised the rather small old town, dissolving the classical square and altering its constellation into a continuous network, nurturing the eagerness to grasp a slice of the street's façade and appeal to the attention of the passenger. Besides from the street promenade, the city of Iași still holds the avatar of the city that bears respect to human scale, unrushed by the ever-growing tendency of nurturing "fast" architecture and keeping its height friendly to human perception and memory. The population of ~270 000 people (as of the 2021 census) of Iași (accounting for the city, and not the county) define the place of a community large enough to grow a consistent critique's table, yet small enough to build close relationships between academics and the community. The nature of such close relationships has proven, in time, for Iași, to be the exact resort to empower the appropriation of its landscape, both built, natural and cultural. The faculty of Architecture of Iași relies on many lessons of the architecture's role in establishing and expanding cultural avatars. One of them is grounded in the architecture of its building, which depicts the great talent of Nicolae Porumbescu, the architect who authored the building's design, a mind proving able to speculate the communist propaganda's dictums and change them into geometrical experiment. These directives referred to how new buildings were meant to showcase the newly discovered materials and technologies which relied on concrete and embody nationalist incentives which were generally expected to reference rural traditional values. As such, the concrete architecture of Porumbescu

distills the rich rural world of techniques, crafts and ornaments specific to wood construction to a language of symbols, thus reaching sublime works of concrete which speak profoundly of a very local architecture. A second lesson is to be drawn from the very life of the architect giving the name of the Faculty, George Matei Cantacuzino, who only spend his last 5 years in Iași as a form of exile established by the communist regime. Here, the architect infused his most profound thoughts and philosophies of architecture, equipped with the maturity with a lifetime of work, research, travels and observations, into designing the administrative buildings of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași, where his understanding and resonance with the palladian forms echoed in an outstanding lesson of how contemporary architecture becomes timeless, adopting universal architectural values and gracefully connecting to the context through understanding its resorts of coherence and semantics.

Literature Review

George Matei Cantacuzino argues on the importance on not sacrificing the friendly pace of the city of Iași in the name of fashion (Cantacuzino, 1947), insisting on the importance of understanding the built landscape of Iași as an ensemble and avoid isolating heritage fragments, while dissolving less obvious elements.

Herman Hertzberger's *Lessons for Students in Architecture* promotes real-world observations, encouraging students to understand the impact of architecture through experiencing, rather than just by appropriating pure theory. The author is an advocate of critical thinking, experimentations and drawing lessons from what is built, adapting the built landscape, while understanding its lessons and regarding architecture as a lived-in experience, rather than an idealized object. The author argues that the user and the form reinforce each other and interact in a similar equation to the individual and its community (Hertzberger, 2005[1991]).

The production of space of Henri Lefebvre argues on the importance of the human perception's derivatives of space, considering design as

a mediator between the activity of the mind and social activity, seen as the further natural continuation of perpetuating representations and derivatives of space into consciousness (Lefebvre, 1974[1984]).

This thought fueled the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty much earlier in *Phénoménologie de la perception* [Phenomenology of perception] (1945), in which the author argues that perception is not a passive means of capturing sensorial data, but a dynamic process which mediates the relationship between the user and its environment in a dynamic and evolving manner, ideally resulting in the reciprocal enhancing of the both – human experience and consciousness activity and the quality of the built environment to further host, represent and nourish the process of thought. The author discusses the fact that the activity of the mind fuses with its environment and time context – “je ne suis pas dans l’espace et dans le temps; je suis à l’espace et au temps, mon corps s’applique à eux et les embrasse. [I am not in space and time; I am of the space and of the time, my body applies itself to them and embraces them.]” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

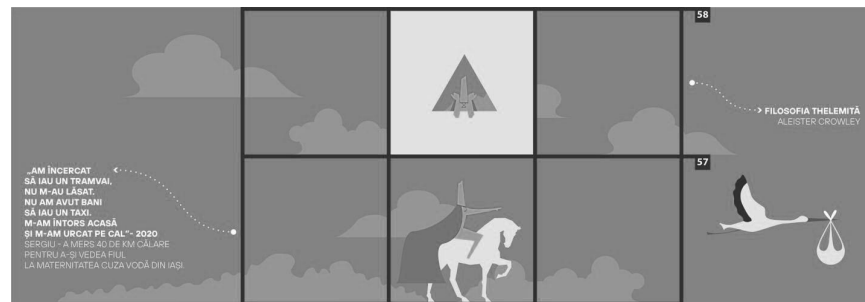
Methodology

It is of utmost importance to understand the architectural cultural genealogy of a city’s school of architecture, place it in the context of its city’s potential becoming, understand the educational means of nurturing, empowering and representing the matrix of identities coming together and working on its role as a mediating platform between the general landscape (natural, built, cultural) and its users.

In order to grow and support this platform, the Faculty of Architecture in Iași has been collaborating with institutions of local authorities and the educational system, making the results of its research accessible to the public and prone to discussion and debate. Multidisciplinary workshops have shown interesting results of intersection between architecture and cinematography, graphics, arts, literature, photography, sociology, videography and many more. This activity reverberates in many forms of manifestation, such as artistic projects of its students and teachers and even surpasses the production of

spaces into abstract explorations which join together local landscapes with universal ones. The Faculty of Architecture in Iași insinuates itself in the metaphorical public square of the city through a range of initiatives meant to bring its presence and activity to a more relatable dimension in the eye of the general public: The Great Monthly Challenge, The Weektophography, The Society, Film, Architecture Workshop, the Open Days events, the exhibitions, workshops, guided tours and its many other single events have grown its popularity and rendered it as an intellectual playground. The use of AI into the Representations subject unveiled creative ways of reviewing elements of architecture of Iași as instances of vocabulary and conceptual ingredients into exploring a contemporary possible landscape based on architectures of Iași. In the same manner, architecture and illustration proved a means to exploring space, culture and local

Fig. 1 Fragment from "Călătorie în jurul lui acasă" (Travel around home) where the author illustrated the experience of a father travelling to the maternity of Iași by horse to visit his newborn during the pandemic.



experiences (as seen in Fig. 1) during the pandemic times as is the example of the project entitled "Călătorie în jurul lui acasă" (Travel around home), where the author explores how illustrating architecture can be a means of improving, healing and educating a society visibly affected by the impact of the pandemic period (Teodor-Stanciu, 2021).

Apart from extra-curricular manifestations of its presence, it is the intellectual outcome of its educational process that grows an architectural culture. Starting from the first design task of the 1st Year of study, students learn the lessons of symmetry, dominant, rhythm, contrast, volumetric analysis, context, positive and negative by analyzing and comparing architectures of the city of Iași, while investigating rapports and subtle connections between them.

Throughout the faculty, students have the opportunity of envisioning individual, row and collective housing, kindergartens, office buildings, hotels, sports, events, education and cultural venues, most of the times relying on sites available in Iași. As every project starts with a thorough study of the context, the future architects of the city become more and more acquainted to the beautiful and intriguing collage which the city of Iași embodies. All of these studies, put together, provide a profound lesson about the city, while the students' envisioning formulate a meta-verse of potential cities of Iași.

Results

The unrest creative incubator of visions within the Faculty of Architecture of Iași has drawn its many collaboration and presence within Architecture and Design Festivals such as The Architecture Regional Event of Moldova, Romanian Creative Week. One of the most interesting developments in recent years was the request to organize architecture contests within the faculty, meant to provide ideas and concepts not only for institutions (the most requests being advanced from the Technical University and the City Council), but also for individuals and private entities. Such an example is the "Etajul III" [3rd Floor] contest, asking for an interior design projects for the office space of a local company. The winning project was implemented with insignificant modifications compared to the proposed concept, high amount of satisfaction from both the client and the students winning an award and setting an example for how the Faculty and its community may be joined in a process of education and practice with practical outcomes.

Advocating for organizing competitions in architecture in Iași links to very interesting moments in guiding the voice of the community and mediating collaboration with the City Council and investors. The community of people of Iași, relying on both specialists, enthusiasts and residents of Iași has an ever-growing voice in public debates about important projects of the city. The replanting of linden trees (the symbol of the city) on Ștefan cel Mare Boulevard (the main pedestrian

Boulevard) stands witness to this assertion. An open letter signed in 2016 by architects (starting with the dean of the Faculty of Architecture), specialists, academics and community managed to re-evaluate the methodology for investments in the city center which are close to monuments and heritage areas, asking for the premises of organizing an international competition of architecture, endorsed by the Romanian Order of Architects, in order to ensure that quality prevails over the best price. This reverberated in asking for competitions regarding representative areas of the city and found its echo in how the international competition for the Palas Development took place in Iași, having as invited guests UNStudio, Foster and Partners, MVRDV and Zaha Hadid, regarded as consecrated names in the architecture field. Even though UNStudio won the competition, the moment ignited the beginning for a fruitful collaboration with the other studios, Foster being currently in charge for envisioning an impressive area in neighboring the historic center of Constanța.

The activities of the Faculty of Architecture speak of a city willing to connect its past to a coherent fabric thriving in vision. The Memorat project, developed by a team which includes members of the teaching staff at the Faculty of Architecture constitutes itself as a digital monograph in documenting versions of the city from the past, making use of very diverse fragments of archive and blending them together into one coherent, explorable tridimensional virtual world.

The Municipal Museum of Iași exhibits, as of 2021, a 3x2m model of the city in the middle of the 19th Century. This was the result of over 3 years of research and work done for the Restoration subject at the Faculty of Architecture, covering the 3rd and 4th Years of Study and providing the models of churches, boyar's residences and palaces, their entire household and context. The initiative was forwarded by the Municipal Museum and the City Hall in the form of a research grant. The model stemmed the collaboration with numerous specialists in architecture, history, landscaping, and design and is, to this day, the main attraction for the ever-growing number of visitors.



*Fig. 2 Collage from the
"MEMORAT" project,
authors: Ramona
Costea, Tiberiu Teodor-
Stanciu, Cosmin Ceucă*

Discussion

The study and vision repertoire which the Faculty of Architecture of Iași inherently builds has become more visible and connected to the life and the culture of the city. All of its studies and envisioning set the premises for developing potential instruments that could better enhance the study and collaboration between architects, authorities, the community and the Faculty. An updatable model of the city, both in digital and physical form, might provide the physical forum for debate and growing a sustainable dialogue between the beholders of the city. Such an object could encourage and stimulate even further production of urban and architectural visionary ideas for the city. A physical model could function as a “round table” of debating large scale or complex interventions in the city, a testing bench for concepts and ideas and even a pretext for engaging the community, stakeholders and students even more in growing the city responsibly and rewiring trust in the built environment and its authors.

Aligned with the worldwide tendencies, the community of Iași hasn't been deprived of its polarization tendencies. Architecture in Iași is confronted, among many, with two prominent attitudes towards the built landscape – that of renegating the historical layers, in the race for new, contemporary aesthetics better serving the investors' interests, and that of affirming the built heritage. The history of the city explains how each of its ages has cauterized fronts of the previous one, rendering the city of today as a palimpsest and a collage of indefinite or in-progress visions. Iași could easily host an open-air museum of architecture, as key places in the city showcase a very wide range of avatars it embraced, through time. This does not set the premises for interpreting it as a place of chaos, but rather as a challenge to rearticulate meanings and geometries into a more coherent hypertext.

Conclusion

Relying on the examples of Nicolae Porumbescu and George Matei Cantacuzino, the Faculty of architecture of Iași holds the premises for a very interesting capacitor of architects, learning how to measure and

dose between the creatively speculating experiences of the mind and resourcefully representing timeless values of architecture which link the local to the universal in the endeavor of addressing its users' perception and memory in an enticing, trustworthy and graceful way.

The unfolding of discourses in Iași, besides conceiving a very sincere image of the political and cultural context of each era, offer a very rich insight into the city's genealogy and identity today. It is, perhaps, a critical regionalism in pedagogy today the means of better reconnecting the Faculty of Architecture with its environment and community, while growing a sustainable platform of communication, creation and theorization.

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Facultatea în arhitectura Iașului

(rezumat)

Creșterea și disoluția mediului construit și a arhitecturii reprezintă, probabil, o reprezentare vie a modului în care funcționează memoria, păstrând mare parte din ceea ce rezistă provocării timpului și „uitând”, uneori în mod natural, alteori alterat de traume sau alimentat de lipsa de înțelegere, apropierea și conexiunea cu cultura și cunoașterea utilizatorilor. Lumea tot mai divizată de astăzi se reflectă într-un peisaj arhitectural care, uneori, duce la o lipsă de coerență semantică și de

legătură cu o paradigmă mai largă. Desigur, demersul și experimentul vizionar sunt, în mare parte, un exercițiu neintenționat în cadrul sarcinilor de proiectare ale unei Facultăți de Arhitectură, servind în principal ca o structură urbană istorică mai mult sau mai puțin definită. Cu toate acestea, fiecare Facultate de Arhitectură, prin găzduirea proiectelor sale în orașul său, prezintă în mod intrinsec un muzeu al posibilităților, un laborator de testare al viziunilor, confruntând discursuri, direcții estetice, semnificații și atitudini față de existent, formulând bazele unei hermeneutici arhitecturale și urbane specifice. Într-o lume divizată până la fracturi ideologice, lucrul la proiectul unui oraș coerent, împluternicitor și relevant transformă Facultatea de Arhitectură într-o platformă pentru construirea încrederii și colaborării.