

Collaboration as a formative exercise in architectural education: The case of “Tomorrow’s Architects” as an emerging model of interdisciplinary pedagogy

Alexandra-Mihaela Parpală^{1*}

¹“Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urban Planning, Bucharest, Romania

*alexandra.parpala3@gmail.com

Received: September 20, 2025

Accepted for publication: October 6, 2025

Abstract

The conference theme invites reflection on how architecture schools shape the host city and, conversely, are shaped by it. This paper presents a critical analysis of how student-led initiatives can act as catalysts for alternative forms of learning, rooted in collaboration, trust, and a strong commitment to transforming ideas into action. The case study focuses on the NGO Tomorrow’s Architects and two of its core projects: INFOARH and REconnect. The research methodology combines a critical analysis of the NGO’s activity report with direct observation and autoethnographic reflection.

Keywords: student initiative, collaborative pedagogy, architectural education, interdisciplinary collaboration, community engagement, national network.

Introduction

The CONVERGENCE conference theme, Architecture as a Framework for Collaboration and Trust, explores how architecture can become a catalyst for trust and collaboration in contemporary society. Within this framework, the section The City of the Architecture School invites reflection on how the city acts both as a stage for architectural thinking and as an active force shaping students' training through its challenges and resources. This paper proposes an expanded interpretation of this relationship, emphasizing how extracurricular initiatives can transform the city from a theoretical field of study into a space of authentic contact and civic engagement. Prior research highlights that architecture is inherently a social and ethical practice engaging with communities (Till, 2005), and that learning situated in real contexts fosters deeper professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The case study of the NGO "Tomorrow's Architects" illustrates how student-led initiatives can become alternative formative environments rooted in collaboration, trust, and interdisciplinary exchange. Unlike hypothetical projects developed in studio settings, these actions are grounded in real situations and direct interaction with actors beyond academia. This paper argues that such participatory efforts are themselves an emerging form of pedagogy, enabling students to assume an active role in redefining the relationship between the architect, the community, and the city, and to cultivate professional identities that are conscious, empathetic, and civically engaged.

Literature Review

Collaborative pedagogy emphasizes co-creation of knowledge among students, educators, and communities (Bacharach & Washut-Heck, 2021). Till (2005) and later studies on design activism establish a critical framework for understanding architecture's public role. International 'design-build' and community-engaged programs (e.g., Rural Studio at Auburn University; Baupiloten at TU Berlin) provide tested models of student groups and urban engagement. In Romania,

initiatives like *De-a Arhitectura*, similarly indicate a rising civil-society role in shaping architectural pedagogy. This paper situates Tomorrow's Architects within these debates, highlighting its distinctive integration of private sponsorship and citywide mentorship.

Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative analysis of the activities of the NGO "Tomorrow's Architects" (2023–2024). The author was directly involved in organizing the projects, taking an auto-ethnographic stance complemented by direct observation and document analysis. Internal reports, feedback forms, correspondence, promotional materials, social media posts, and event photos were examined to reconstruct each project's trajectory and formative dimension. This approach revealed collaborative dynamics, role negotiation, and obstacles faced, highlighting the educational impact on participants' professional and personal development.

INFOARH was conceived as a tripartite interaction framework among students, faculty, and business representatives, with the primary objective of overcoming the formal constraints imposed by academic hierarchies. The event opened dialogue on topics such as professional expectations, career development, systemic dysfunctions, and the ethical dimensions of architectural practice. In this context, a temporary but significantly relevant community of practice emerged. Knowledge transfer was configured bidirectionally and co-constructed, reflecting the fundamental principles of collaborative design. The organizational process, bureaucracy, legal documents, approvals, logistics, and partner negotiations, contributed to the team's professionalization and the development of skills relevant to contemporary architectural practice, creating space for reflection on challenges beyond the university environment. They negotiated with partners, contacted guests from the professional and academic spheres, and designed and implemented the entire organizational framework from scratch.

The REconnect project began as a means of career orientation for high school students facing uncertainties about choosing a professional path. Its primary goal was not merely to provide general information but to personalize discussions according to each participant's interests, concerns, and context. Instead of a formal presentation, meetings took the form of one-on-one conversations between students and university peers from various fields—architecture, medicine, engineering, the arts—who shared their own choices, difficulties, and discoveries. This created a space of trust and peer support, emphasizing experience-sharing over traditional mentoring. In parallel, architecture students initiated the rehabilitation of the chemistry lab at “Emil Racoviță” National College as both a gesture of gratitude and an exercise in spatial transformation.

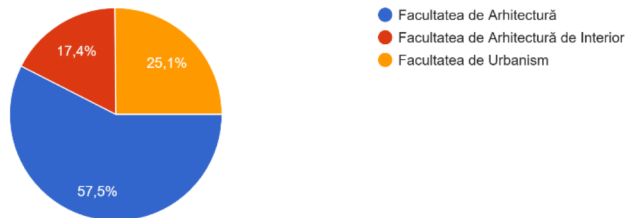
Results

INFOARH - Tripartite Networking Event

INFOARH created a dialogue among students(all specialties), university, and business representatives, addressing professional expectations, ethics, and career development. Students managed the full organizational process, from legal documentation to partner negotiations, strengthening project management and communication skills. The private scholarships obtained, secured sponsorships to reward academic excellence and civic involvement, exemplifying transparent collaboration between academia and the business sector.

Fig. 1 An early survey of estimated number of participants and their faculties that took part at the event

Facultatea:
167 de răspunsuri



Anul de studiu:
167 de răspunsuri

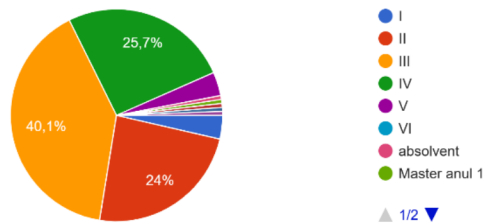


Fig. 2 An early survey of estimated number of participants and their grade that took part at the event

REconnect - Intergenerational Mentorship

REconnect facilitated one-on-one conversations between high school students and university peers across multiple disciplines, fostering a space of trust and informed career choice. A parallel initiative proposed the refurbishment of a high-school chemistry lab, demonstrating the spatial impact of civic engagement.

Project	Objectives	Methods	Key Outcomes
INFOARH	Professional dialogue & networking	Legal setup, event design, stakeholder engagement	Strengthened professional skills; city-school collaboration
	Support academic merit & civic involvement	Private sponsorship, transparent evaluation	
REconnect	Career guidance & intergenerational trust	Peer mentoring, one-on-one discussion	Personalized mentorship; urban engagement

Table 1 Comparative Summary of Projects

Discussion

This paper proposes a reevaluation of how we understand architectural training, highlighting the decisive role of extracurricular initiatives in developing an emerging pedagogy centered on collaboration, trust, and active commitment. The case study of the NGO “Tomorrow’s Architects” shows that involving students in real projects they themselves design, manage, and evaluate produces significant transformations both individually and institutionally.

Collaboration as a Mechanism for Active Learning

In all three projects, collaboration functioned not simply as an operational tool but as a method of learning through practice. The student team was involved in the entire process of conception, organization, and implementation, assuming real responsibilities. This distribution of roles contributed to strengthening organizational skills, adaptability, and strategic communication competencies rarely exercised in traditional studio settings.

Building Trust Among Generations and Educational Actors

The projects created contexts in which trust was gradually built, among students, between students and faculty, and between students and professionals outside the school. At INFOARH, this manifested through authentic intergenerational dialogue, the acknowledgment of student contributions within the academic space and consolidated by demonstrating that the business sector concretely supports excellence starting from the training stage of a professional path with private scholarships. In the case of REconnect, the proximity between voices similar in age but at different educational stages fostered horizontal and empathetic relationships.

The City as an Educational Partner

While the school provides the theoretical framework for training, the analyzed projects activated the city as a space for application, negotiation, and reciprocal learning. In each case, the actions required stepping outside the university sphere and interacting with concrete

urban realities, such as high schools, companies, and external partners. This type of contact contributed to developing civic awareness, an understanding of architecture as a socially impactful profession, and validation of the idea that the city is not merely a project territory but an active participant in the educational process.

Responsibility and Autonomy in Training

A key outcome that emerged across all initiatives was the transfer of responsibility to the student. The initiatives analyzed were not created by the administrative framework but were designed and implemented from scratch by students. This autonomy resulted not only in deeper involvement but also in internalizing values of teamwork, rigor, and coherence in action. The student is not a passive beneficiary but an active agent of their own formation a position rarely encountered in conventional curricular scenarios.

The Possibility of Expansion into a National Framework

Through their replicable nature, the analyzed projects point to the possibility of building a national educational network in which collaboration, mutual support, and civic engagement become structural components of the training process. This outcome is not merely a finding but a possible direction for institutional and cultural development that responds to a real need to reconfigure the relationship among school, student, and city.

Initiative	Geographic & Institutional Context	Primary Goals	Educational Approach	Table 2 Comparative Educational Approaches
Tomorrow's Architects (Romania)	Student-led NGO, "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urban Planning, Bucharest	Foster collaboration and trust between students, professionals, and civic actors; integrate	Strengthened professional skills; city-school collaboration	

the city as a
pedagogical partner

De-a Arhitectura (Romania)	National NGO partnering with schools and municipalities	Architectural literacy for pre-university; civic awareness through design thinking	Workshops in primary/secondary schools; architects teach alongside teachers
Rural Studio (USA)	Auburn University, Alabama	Introduces students to professional social responsibility through rural housing and community projects	Immersive, full- scale construction projects in underserved communities
Baupiloten (Germany)	Technical University of Berlin	Integrate participatory design with professional practice in urban contexts	Students co- design and co- build with real clients, often municipal or cultural institutions

Conclusion

The case of 'Tomorrow's Architects' exemplifies how extracurricular initiatives can generate replicable models of collaborative pedagogy. Recommendations for scaling and institutional uptake include: (1) establishing clear partnership frameworks for private sponsorship to protect academic integrity; (2) adopting mixed-method evaluations for future projects (pre/post surveys, longitudinal tracking of participants, feedback forms); (3) creating an inter-university knowledge exchange platform to test replicability across contexts.

References

Boyer, E. L., & Mitgang, L. D. (1996). *Building community: A new future for architecture education and practice*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation.

Till, J. (2005). The negotiation of hope. In B. Bell & K. Wakeford (Eds.), *Expanding architecture: Design as activism* (pp. 23-33). Metropolis Books.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

De-a Arhitectura Association. (n.d.). *De-a Arhitectura official website*: <https://www.de-a-arhitectura.ro/>

Auburn University. (n.d.). *Rural Studio*. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://ruralstudio.org/>

Technische Universität Berlin. (n.d.). *Baupiloten* [Design-Build Studio]. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://www.baupiloten.com/>

Colaborarea ca exercițiu formativ în educația arhitecturală: Cazul „Arhitectii de Mâine” ca model emergent de pedagogie interdisciplinară

(rezumat)

Tema conferinței invită la reflecție asupra modului în care școlile de arhitectură modelează orașul gazdă și, la rândul lor, sunt modelate de acesta. Această lucrare prezintă o analiză critică a modului în care inițiativele conduse de studenți pot acționa ca factori catalizatori pentru forme alternative de învățare, bazate pe colaborare, încredere și un angajament ferm pentru transformarea ideilor în acțiune. Studiul de caz se concentrează pe ONG-ul „Arhitectii de Mâine” și două dintre proiectele sale de bază: INFOARH și REconnect. Metodologia de cercetare combină o analiză critică a raportului de activitate al ONG-ului cu observația directă și reflecția autoetnografică.