

Architects Who Read

ILAUD and the Predicaments of Direct Experience

Elke Couchez

Dr, UHasselt, elke.couchez@uhasselt.be

ABSTRACT

This paper takes a historical approach to architecture's search for its unique mode of intellectuality and focuses on a mid-1970s debate on direct experience. It concentrates on the tool of 'reading' the city, which was explored at the International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design (ILAUD), established in 1976 by Spazio e Società's founder Giancarlo de Carlo (1919-2005). This educational laboratory – an extension to Team X – invited students and acclaimed practitioners from different universities around the world to rethink urban form. During ILAUD's formative years, the physical and social environment of Urbino functioned as a frame of reference: all participants were invited to develop strategies for urban interventions, based on a thorough understanding of the marks left by social, historical and topographical transformations on the physical space.

'Reading' was the proposed method of action to unravel an intricate web of relationships in the physical environment. De Carlo preferred the analysis of existing urban complexes through direct experience over the interpretation of maps or archival sources. Reading by drawing, arguably, was not a contemplative activity, but a performative practice best suited for architectural intervention.

By contrasting the studio brief of the second ILAUD residential summer courses in Urbino to a series of highly illustrative student drawings, this paper sheds light on the different and often contradictory implementations of this method of reading by drawing. This paper furthermore argues that this experiential planning method became a tool in enabling and representing a critical stance vis-à-vis the figure of the architectural historian and traditional 'linear' historiography. Reading by drawing was an attempt to retrieve an 'essence' which was believed to be 'truer than history or words', and thus involved a search for an architectural knowledge that was embedded in architectural and urban form. This paper argues, however, that reading by drawing was by no means a self-contained analytical tool that covered all layers of complexity, but a deliberately tentative design approach that fed on the hinge between interpretation and projection.

Keywords: ILAUD, Giancarlo de Carlo, Reading, Drawing, Direct Experience, Pedagogy, Architecture, Historiography, Architectural Intellectuality

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes a historical approach to architecture's search for its unique mode of intellectuality and focuses on a mid-1970s debate on direct experience. It concentrates on the tool of 'reading' the city, which was explored at the International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design (ILAUD), established in 1976 by Spazio e Società's founder Giancarlo de Carlo (1919-2005). This

educational laboratory – an extension to Team X – invited students and acclaimed practitioners from different Western universities to rethink urban form. Was this activity of reading the city by drawing in any way helpful to grasp the complexity of urban form? To answer that question, we will join a group of students on their first site visit to the Via Saffi area in the historical town of Urbino, where the second ILAUD summer school took place and we will have a close look at some of their design proposals to evaluate the underlying principles and contradictions of the tool of ‘reading’ the city.

1. Introducing the Tool: Reading the City

It was a Monday evening, 29 August 1977. A group of students gathered in a room stuffed with untouched white drawing boards and vacant exhibition walls. They had just flown in from different countries in Europe and the US and were welcomed with a generous wine & cheese party by the ILAUD staff members. Their home universities had been invited by Giancarlo De Carlo to participate in this educational laboratory. The students had engaged in permanent initiatives throughout the year and they were now ready to start a highly-ambitious eight-week residential summer course organized in-situ in the Italian town of Urbino. Wide-legged jeans and wide eyes from excitement and a long journey, they waited for Giancarlo De Carlo to kick off the summer school.

In his opening speech, De Carlo vividly talked about the historical town of Urbino, where he had worked in the last years, and briefly introduced the central themes of the summer school, being ‘reuse’ and ‘participation’. (De Carlo, 1977, p. 5) Some students might have noticed the fervour in his hand gestures when he talked about the recent post-war developments in the city. Predominantly residential zones, as he told them, were jeopardized by an uncontrolled mix of developer- state- and university-sponsored buildings and consequently had been disconnected from the historical town centre and the surrounding rural areas. De Carlo told them how such transformations of the physical space always reflect changes in society – for instance in the behaviour of politicians, administrators, lobbyists, university clients, tourists, ... He warned them for mere historicism in the revitalization of a historic city centre – and encouraged them to enter into a dialogue between historical stratification and new needs of the users of space. He emphasised, in line with Team X thought, that urban form could not be separated from social awareness. The first four weeks of the residential course in Urbino were devoted to this exercise of ‘reading’. The role of the designer, according to De Carlo, was to empathetically engage with the pre-existing layers of meaning and relationships and to articulate them through the activity of drawing. Giancarlo De Carlo later explained:

“First of all, we start with the ‘reading’ of the places, extending the perspective as much as possible and at the same time focusing on their specific characters. If one can read the great palimpsest of the city and the territory one is able to understand everything: the events that occurred through time, the history, the social and cultural development, the sense and the role of the organizational systems and of the architectural forms. But in order to read one needs to be able to look in the depth of the stratifications, to discover and select critically the most significant signs; one needs to design. Our design is ‘tentative’, meaning that it does not seek for univocal solutions but to match confront the project area with series of hypotheses that unveil its substance and open up the process of its transformation; at the same time they ‘tempt’ it and drive it to talk about its capacity of resisting to change, of how it can be changed in order to attain structures and forms that are appropriate to the circumstances and corresponding to the expectations.” [1]

2. The Site Visit: Reading Via Saffi area

On their second day in the city of Urbino, the students gained first-hand knowledge of the site they would be focusing on in their design works. Standing on a polygon-shaped piazza in the heart of

the historical centre, their eyes were gently directed to the decorated pilasters on the lower band and the first story of the Palazzo Ducale. They were looking at Frederico III da Montefeltro's 15th-century Renaissance palace, which was built on a solid rock hillside overlooking the small town. Sturdy with an air of schizophrenia, this palace was a built compromise between an impenetrable fortress and an elegant fairy-tale-like castle topped with two elegant towers or 'Torricelli', which could be seen from afar.

This place marked the end of the busy Via Saffi, which connected the Ducal Palace in the inner city to the outermost point of the city, where 13th century fortified walls enfolded the former Roman layout of the city and made a clear barrier between historical city and the broader region. John Messervy, one of the students, described this street as a "dead end of the spine", sitting "over a hill from the town's centre, Piazza della Republicca and working its way down taking the layout of a herringbone pattern". (Messervy 1978, 115) The Via Saffi axis was once intended as a gateway between Europe and Rome, but changed into one of the main arterial roads of the town, scattered with parking lots and surrounded by residential and university buildings. On their walk down this street, the students realised that the city they experienced during their site visit was far removed from Montefeltro's ideal geometric plan. The overall formal and organizational renaissance scheme for the city had been drastically adjusted from the 19th century onwards, resulting in the loss of visual continuity and the scattering of space into different peripheral zones. Via Saffi, therefore, offered a rather typical Italian urban context to consider ways to counteract what Norberg-Schulz had called the 'loss of place' in his lecture at the first ILAUD course. More than halfway on their walking trajectory, and hidden behind thick masonry walls, the students also came across a fascinating example of how to consider urban form as an integration of existing historical form and the new functions. (McKean, 2004) They entered the Il Magistero, a former 18th-century convent which was turned into the Faculty of Arts by Giancarlo de Carlo only a year ago¹. Just like the Ducal Palace, Il Magistero was a compromise between heavy masonry outside walls, landscape and sight. Beyond its solid outside wall, the building was simultaneously absorbed in the existing fabric and reached out to connect to the surrounding landscape through a conical glass roof, which could be seen from afar. Taking different routes through this university campus, the students were surprised by how this building reproduced the spatial experience of the city on the smaller scale of the building - noticing how it closed off, opened up, hid, revealed and layered space. During their 8-week residency in Urbino, Il Magistero would come to mind as a built manifesto for the dialogue between historical form and contemporary needs.

3. The Design Proposals: Readability

After their site visit, the student formed groups and formulated proposals to reconnect the Via Saffi area to the historical centre. Looking at their proposals, as documented in the 1977 ILAUD yearbook, we can discern two contradictory implementations of De Carlo's method of reading the city: the first group of design proposals was based on a typo-morphological approach and stressed the importance of the 'readable' city, whereas a second group started from a structural approach to enhance user-participation.

Readability and imaginability

The first group of student proposals sought a middle ground between the readability and imageability of the city. At the end of the eight-week summer residency, the Oslo group for instance presented a detailed visual analysis of the different topographical and physical conditions of the town and the Via Saffi district. Through a series of empirical drawings and

¹ For De Carlo's interventions in Urbino and his work for the university, see (McKean & Carlo, 2004, p. 58)

drawn in confident, clear lines, they analysed the interconnections between different elements in the built environment such as existing viewing lines, street patterns, silhouettes and street outlines – a typo-morphological approach reminiscent to that of Kevin Lynch in his landmark study *The image of the city* (1960). Rather than a categorisation of visual elements, the Oslo group aimed to transform existing urban arrangements through drawing. All visual elements were isolated from their urban context on a white picture plane, to redefine the in-between spaces in the city and to explore alternative pedestrian connections. The drawings hypothetically suggested movements from the remote Via Saffi area to the city centre that corresponded to the city's topographical features – up down, along, around –, and which cropped up by opening up solid mass and providing access to places which had been inaccessible before.

Another student group composed of students from MIT and ETH Zürich, proposed what they called a 'phenomenological reading' of the Via Saffi area². They started with reading basic structural elements of town – such as walls, streets and blind alleys – and concluded that the steep and difficult path from the centre to the Via Saffi area could be made more 'readable' or 'identifiable'. They chose the Santa Chiara complex as a testing ground to visually and physically connect the main circulation of the building – its arcades and ramp – to the street and the piazza Rinascimento. With this design intervention, they hoped to create a new passageway that connected the street level to the backyard garden.

Erika Franke and Mary Griffin, two other MIT students also expressed their concerns that the interrupted street pattern had resulted in a 'weak city image'. They as well were committed to increasing the imageability of individual complexes. In a series of drawings, they tried to re-establish the contours of the street patterns and give 'ends' to the streets, which arguably would make movement easier.

All three proposals were speculative and could not stand the test of implantation in the real urban fabric. Moreover, the overemphasis on the visual and material structure of the city prevented a thorough engagement with this issue of participation. Nonetheless, it was through visual linking and creating new movements that cut through public and private spaces that the group showed a deep commitment to Christian Norberg-Schulz's call to 'make place'. Reading and drawing, after all, enabled them to move from a city of parts to a city of connections and possible relations.

Reading and mediating

The KU Leuven group employed the tool of reading differently than the other groups. (Kuhk et al., 2019, pp. 29–56) The group of three started with the study of existing buildings in the Via Saffi area by freehand on-site sketching. In the second phase of their project, they reconsidered the idea of parcelling. Rather than defining how the area should look like based on existing historical and topographical features, the group members only drew the outer contours and the basic structure of an area. The KU Leuven proposal consisted of a matrix or a grid, offering the inhabitants a 'mediating spatial structure' which they could fill up according to their own needs and their own 'collective imagination'. (De Leye et al., 1978, p. 113) By proposing voided drawings or grids, the students hoped to get rid of the too repressive street model in contemporaneous planning models. Underlying this project was again the idea of making place, but it was the user, rather than the designer who was core to the planning process. In the KU Leuven proposal, the diagrammatic drawing was a mediating system, which could show the users different possibilities without confining them to single options and would arguably 'educate' them into a 'new socio-cultural pattern of values'. (De Leye et al., 1978, p. 113)

We have discussed two different approaches to reading the city. In the first approach, the experience of the city was directly connected to its image. Students asked how a city could be read and how its imaginability could be improved through design. In a second approach, reading

² The group consisted of: Kay Barned (MIT), Alan Joslin (MIT), Patric Huber (ETH Zurich), Thomas Meyer (ETH Zurich), Markus Schafle (ETH), Rita Schiess (ETH)

the city was conducted with a social lens and imposed an open diagram on an urban void that would – in an ideal situation – allow inhabitants to transform the urban landscape. What surfaces in these student drawings is a lack of a concerted approach to the analysis of urban form and a premature or rather intuitive understanding of the central notions of reuse and participation. All student groups grappled with the challenges of an urban discipline in its infancy; their drawings aimed at outlining urban forms which connected the city centre to the periphery and the region in a dynamic exchange³. Though these urban readings resulted in contradictory propositions which were often incomplete, probing and contingent in nature, they were underpinned by implicit theories on how to approach and design urban form. So, what were the underlying assumptions of reading as a design tool?

4. Reading as Direct Experience

In reassessing the design tool of reading the city, we must, first of all, acknowledge that Giancarlo De Carlo's reflection on how to read urban form in architectural education evolved within the post-war Italian discourse on the European city and the region⁴. Prompted by a general dissatisfaction with universalistic modernist planning models and the imposition of prior visions upon the city – which arguably disregarded human needs and neglected the existing historical, physical and topographical factors of an area – he, together with other architects, theorists and educators turned to the urban 'real'. (Zucchi & Carlo, 1992, p. 5) As Micha Bandini noted in his reflection on architectural approaches to urban form, 'reading' was a central attitude in the 1960s and 70s debate on urban morphology. (Bandini, 1992, p. 115) Proponents of the Venice School such as Aldo Rossi, Carlo Aymonio 'read' the city on a morphological level. In this approach, "the morphological nature of the urban fabric was connected with its social, political and demographic aspects" – an attitude which can still be considered central to the understanding of contemporary architecture. Giancarlo de Carlo himself was rather as a 'voluntary outsider' in this Italian debate on urban form, carefully barring the work of Rossi, Aymonio and Quaroni because he deemed their typological approach too reductive. Rather than engaging in the Italian debate, De Carlo sought kindred spirits in Team X and well-established international architecture schools – for instance maintaining close contacts with Geert Bekaert at the KU Leuven.

Secondly, and more interesting in the context of this session, is that reading as a tool epitomized a 1970s disciplinary tension between architects and historians. We can, for instance, deduce this from De Carlo's statements on reading as a design approach: "It is an extraordinary proposition that a study of the places we inhabit offers a much truer and fuller tale than all the words which we conventionally define as 'history'". (McKean & Carlo, 2004, p. 48) And he continued: "There are events that are not recorded in the archives and yet are embedded in the architectural forms and testify to the lengthy layering process over centuries". De Carlo – finding a theoretical bedrock in the writings of Christian Norberg-Schulz, who was a welcome guest speaker at the ILAUD residential courses – preferred the analysis of existing urban complexes through direct experience above the interpretation of maps or archival sources. Though he was quick to admit that oral accounts or written documents had their value in planning processes, for him, these sources were subjective and fixed in the past. Urban form, he argued, could be registered in the physical realm directly and could give clues as to how to design for future use. (McKean & Carlo, 2004, p. 48)

Echoed in De Carlo's quotes is the 19th-century pedagogical concept of 'lived' or 'direct experience', which as Zeynep Çelik wrote, reveals a deep-rooted belief in the existence of "a nondiscursive, nonconceptual way of knowing that could nonetheless compete in its rigour

³ In a seminar on urbanism in 1959, Giuseppe Samonà coined the term 'la nuova dimensione' (the new dimension) to describe the interactions between city, socio-economic formation and countryside. For a deeper reflection on this notion see Mary Louise Lobsinger, 'The New Urban Scale in Italy', *Journal of Architectural Education* 59/3 (2006), 28–38; Pier Vittorio Aureli, 'The Difficult Whole', *Log* 9 (2007), 31.

⁴ For a deeper discussion on the theoretical debates on the urban in architecture, see (Lobsinger 2006)

with reason realized through language, concepts or logic". (Çelik Alexander 2017, 11) Reading by drawing thus was an attempt to retrieve an "essence" which was believed to be "truer than history or words", and thus involved a search for an architectural knowledge that was embedded in architectural and urban form. The way students were to explore the city and read its different layers was by moving through it – for instance, by walking up and down Via Saffi.

By promoting the tool of 'reading', De Carlo made a claim on history from within design practice and indirectly demoted textual history. It can thus be argued that this experiential tool of reading enabled and represented a critical stance vis-à-vis the figure of the architectural historian and traditional 'linear' historiography. Herewith, De Carlo joined in with postmodernist discourses that gave rise to such historical awareness in the 1970s and 1980s and impacted architectural education at large⁵. Different architectural histories could now be sources of influence to the designing architect. This disciplinary consciousness did not only play out in written texts but also in the tools which were used to understand urban form. In the works of De Carlo's contemporaries such as Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo Rossi and Vittorio Gregotti, direct analyses of urban form were often done through plans and displaced texts. (Leach, 2005, p. 78) As Andrew Leach wrote:

"History is not removed from the spectrum of concerns for the fields of criticism aligned with planning, but rather treated as a present contextual condition, along lines similar to the treatment of history by modern architecture, but without the confusion introduced by the manufactured detachment of its writers. They interrogate the past as one dimension of a specific site of enquiry in present in order to propose an idea for the future from a thoroughly considered present. Urban typology and the conception of architectural form are thus drawn together in practice where analysis informs the plan." (Leach, 2005, p. 78)

But for De Carlo, engaging with history was not without obligation. Underlying this focus on 'direct experience' was a strong hope to develop architectural projects that were committed to matters concerning society at large. De Carlo, whose line of thought can be related to anarchist thinking of for instance Colin Ward, had stressed that history "does not concern itself with the past but with the present and it gives direction to the future." (P.G., 1998, p. 104) This idea pervades all his work, and also his educational project in Urbino⁶.

5. Conclusion: The Predicaments of Reading as Direct Experience

This tool of reading was emblematic for what Tafuri called 'operative history', and held a risk that this approach to history would deform or distort the past to achieve future goals. Tafuri, at all cost, would say that there is no ready-made solution for the urban form to be found in its history. How then, should we evaluate this tool of reading in an educational context?

In this paper, we have put to the test the tool of reading the city by following some of the ILAUD participants on their walk down Via Saffi and analysing their design proposals for that region. The student designs, as documented in the 1977 ILAUD yearbook, show that the activity of reading did not elicit clear messages easily to be turned into design proposals. The wide-ranging propositions show that students were struggling with how to perform this urban reading as part of their design process. They were, as they indicated themselves, "lacking adequate analytical and graphical tools to precisely articulate a highly complex reality". (Baracca, Giuliani, and Rodrigues 1978, 84) The city thus largely remained illegible and its historical complexity was not fully addressed, understood and employed in the student designs. Reading, in that sense, was by

⁵ In his manifesto *Complexity and Contradiction* (1966), Robert Venturi for instance advocated for an architecture which was "more historically informed but not addressed to history per se". This attitude was only one amongst a diversity of attitudes towards the past, as became clear during the Venice Biennale *Presence of the Past* of 1980. For further reading, see: (Szacka, 2011).

⁶ The Italian scene was strongly marked by this debate to which extent history had the potential to 'be committed'. As Karla Keyvanian noted, the 1960s and 70s architectural discourse in Italy was strongly coloured by the left-wing ideas of Gramsci and Benedetto Croce's on the need for a history that was alive. (Keyvanian, 2000)

no means a self-contained analytical tool that covered all layers of complexity, but a deliberately tentative design approach that fed on the hinge between interpretation and projection.

Staged in binary opposition to textual history, the tool of reading and its underlying pedagogy of direct experience upheld a promise of a more democratic and participatory way of perceiving the built environment thus was a response to the alienation engendered by the post-war urban environments. The educators and students were preoccupied with what makes ‘good’ or ‘authentic’ instruments of inquiry to evolve to a committed architectural practice, but their notion of traditional history can at least be called. The rejection of traditional history based on “positivistic faith in documents and the accumulation of often uninterpreted documents” (Keyvanian, 2000, p. 7), was after all compensated by the aspiration to retrieve an ‘essence’ of urban form through direct experience. De Carlo seems to succumb to the temptation of replacing one way of gaining knowledge by another and his tool of reading seems to be based on an untenable opposition between contemplative intellectual pursuit that fixates on the past and performative action and future-based design. Yet, as Celik Alexander wrote, even tools based on the notion of direct experience are “accompanied by strict protocols that dictated another kind of order and syntax upon what was imagined as unmediated lived experience”. (Çelik Alexander, 2017, p. 22) In other words: even direct experience is mediated by the tools we employ.

Though this essay took a historical approach to the general question in this session of the tools of discursive practice, resonances of this pedagogical approach of reading space can still be discerned in today’s studio-based education. The principle of analyzing the urban real by reading its multiple formal and informal layers or traces – both historical, social, and economical – is, for instance, common practice in emerging educational programs focused on regeneration of the built environment through its adaptive reuse. (Van Cleempoel, 2018) Reading, as it is cultivated in various ways in these educational programs, stimulates an emphatic approach to the existing built fabric and contributes to a more sustainable environment, both in ecological and socio-cultural terms⁷. This historical study of ILAUD can be read as a plea to critically reflect on and reassess the pedagogical tools in our studio-based education, and to question how they make a claim on knowledge and how they embody disciplinary tensions and divides.

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⁷ For a more detailed account on the emerging discipline of adaptive reuse, see Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* (Routledge, 2019).

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