# PARTNERSHIP AS A PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY IN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN III-UBI

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## INTRODUCTION

Architectural design presents a particularity when compared to the other courses that make up any architecture study plan. Better known as "workshop" or "studio", architectural design is a potential lab in which teachers and students research, reflect and produce architectural solutions for specific problems.

Usually, such solutions are the answer to programs conceived for a theoretical, unreal person that ends up being assumed as the reflection of each student, with subjectivity and desires of his/her own. In general, these end up determining the final result, after a monologue in which the constraints are limited, in many cases, to the teachers' advices and guidance and to the interpretation (more or less rigorous, depending on the convenience) of current regulations. In any case, the dynamic ends up not having, in general, more than two players: teacher and student. Decades of application of this pedagogical system, with extended lists of schools as evidence, demonstrate its reliability as a strategy for teaching architectural design. But is this the only possible system? Is it enough? Does it provide the architecture's own dimension of reality to the students?

As a lab, immersed in a changing world and society, architectural design should nowadays take on other challenges: 1) to search for innovative pedagogical strategies, capable of increasing the motivation of architecture students, intensifying the "research-reflection-production" dynamic aforementioned; 2) to bring those students closer to the community, allowing them to interact with it not only as users, but as producers of solutions/answers.

As an example, we will present the course of architectural design iii-ubi (master of science in architecture at the university of beira interior, covilhã, portugal), the structure of which grows from the desire to constantly motivate the students, by proposing them challenges that transcend the mere need of meeting academic demands that end up being forgotten. We will reflect upon some of the partnerships that have been developed (by initiative of public/private alliances; or proposed to these by the aforementioned course's teachers).

## SEARCHING FOR INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES: THE PARTNERSHIP CONCEPT

The Portuguese word "parceria" defines a collaborative relationship between two or more people or organizations in order to achieve a common goal. When it is applied to cases such as that of the Architectural Design course, the partnership gives rise to the creation of work teams made up of players with different natures and different duties: teachers and students, coming from the university, and public and/or private organizations, coming from outside the university, that invite or are invited to establish a partnership.

We call internal partnership to one in which the members are teachers and students, without the presence of external partners. We call external partnership to one which comprises teachers, students and public or private organizations. Regarding the external partnership, it may arise from the initiative of any of its parties, with the ones suggested by teachers or external partners being the most common.

In the case of internal partnerships, the common goal is easily structured, as it has its origin and remains within the academic sphere. In the case of external partnerships, it is necessary to conciliate a number of factors that, in any situation, respect the learning goals, as it should never be forgotten that the main partners in this type of association are the students and that the pedagogical strategy should always prevail over the external partner's strategy. These are the grounds on which all external partnerships must be established.

The use of partnership as a pedagogical strategy for teaching Architectural Design presents important advantages: it favors the sense of belonging to a group that turns students into "partners" of the other elements in that group, placing them in a less distant and more equitable, tangible position. This proximity increases the degree of commitment brought into work by students, who thereby feel an increased need to achieve the common goal that has been defined, seeking to provide the best solution they can offer to the partner, whether that is an article for a course's publication or an architectural proposal for the community. On the other hand, the external partnership opens a window allowing the community to

know what happens in the "kitchen" of the Architecture degree, in other words, in Architectural Design classes. It allows the community to know how the future architects are being educated. In less poetic and more pragmatic terms, the external partnership pedagogical strategy allows the community to know how public money is being spent.

One of the attributes of the partnership is the connection that students establish with the outside world, by having to face a real problem, with real constraints, for real people. Here is where all the autism or the typical monologue of a traditional Architectural Design exercise ends, must end, where the figures of the architect/designer and of the client merge into one - the student - or, at most, extend to the teacher who guides him/her.

The partnership pedagogical strategy, specifically the external one, presents an increased productivity when complemented with another strategy: working within an ideas competition system. Each semester, in Architectural Design III-UBI, about ninety students (in teams of two) work in order to provide solutions to a problem. They are not only assessed academically by their teachers, but also participate in public sessions in which they present their results, being submitted to a jury composed by internal and external partners, plus special guests, all of them with different points of view. As in any competition, each team inevitably feels the need to put forward a design strategy that takes them as far as possible in the race to persuade the partner. So, which path to take? The most realistic one, that is apparently closer to the external partner's expectations? The most conceptual one, even if unfeasible, in an attempt to win the partner with something which is unexpected but can captivate him? The initial design stage is crucial and students know it: they should not only be able to persuade, through a well-developed and well-presented proposal, but should also be able to impress, through a solid and, most of all, very well-argued approach: graphically (through the competition poster) and verbally (if they get through to the selected works stage).

Another major advantage of the partnership is the presentation of results. Although all academic work is likely to be presented in publications or exhibitions (it also happens in Architectural Design III-UBI), there is no doubt that the works developed within an external partnership system are those that have more repercussion in the community.

The partnership (internal-external) is one of the engines that make up the work philosophy of Architectural Design III-UBI: to involve students in the dynamic building of the course, to make them feel part of it, not only as pedagogical receivers, but as generators of resources and solutions.

Next, we present some examples of internal and external partnerships developed in Architectural Design III-UBI. We expect that these examples clarify the ideas that are being presented and serve as

proof of the feasibility and advantages of this pedagogical strategy, capable of guiding the students towards stimulating challenges.

### INTERNAL PARTNERSHIP: STUDENTS AS CO-PRODUCERS OF RESOURCES

In the Architectural Design III-UBI case, each semester, teachers and students form an internal partnership with the common goal of thinking about a set of buildings in order to, later on, produce an architectural publication about them (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Internal partnership publication, 2011-2012 school year: "Minimum Space".

This partnership with the students arose, in the 2010-2011 school year, from the need to mobilize them to "see" architecture; not simply to "look at" it, but to "see" it. The excess of information coming from the Internet, through platforms and blogs (not always managed by critics with enough architectural culture to validate their choices), through monographic publications that multiply, even when the buildings they show have not yet been built (forgetting that, in order to verify a building's transcendence we need to have a temporal perspective that allows measuring its impact on society and knowing the intensity of its light, ephemeral or timeless, before presenting them "a link away"). Our students oscillate daily between two attitudes, caused by the obscene amount of information that new technologies subject them to: total anaesthesia or total disorientation, which prevent them to tell the difference between good and bad architecture, between "cultured" and "commercial" architecture. It is clear that there is an absence of tools that allow them to recognize which architecture may "teach them something", that there is an inability to recognize, to organize, to value, to take in and to extrapolate those universal principles and values which lie within the essence of architecture, the ones which write a building in History forever.

As a product, the publication is the internal partnership's ultimate goal. It is the corollary of a pedagogical strategy that has been

implemented in the course's tutored hours for three semesters. But it is not the only goal, nor the most important. It is the visible result, left to all students from the Architecture Degree. But there is another goal, which is intangible but not less real: the knowledge that each student gets from the course, built within a group through the debate between everyone, which is added to the conceptual and cultural baggage that will follow him/her forever.

This knowledge is used directly in the course's practical hours as, in each semester, the analysis and debate sessions, followed by the publication, gather a set of architectural works framed by a topic of analysis, which is never random but always connected with the theme that is being developed in those practical hours.

In this partnership, the work is developed in groups of two students. It consists in analyzing an architectural work, sometimes provided by the teachers, other times looked up by the students themselves. The work stages are: 1) the research of graphic and written material about the work suggested by the teachers, followed by a selection of the most important material; 2) a public presentation in tutored hours made by the students themselves, followed by a group debate about the analysis that was carried out; 3) exhibition and debate in the course's virtual Facebook space; 4) concise and systematic organization of the information in a standard printed record sheet, suggested by the teachers, which will become an article in the publication.

As in any partnership, there is a compromise for both parties. The students commit themselves to attend the weekly hours that, according to the Course plan, are of optional attendance. They commit themselves to look for, to analyse and to organize materials in order to produce a speech they can share with teachers and colleagues. They also commit themselves to produce their own small part of the publication. They know that, without their work, the weekly debate sessions cannot be carried out and the book publication cannot come true. From the teachers' side, we try to provide the basic tools needed for a proper development of the work (including technical support time, also in tutored hours, to learn how to use the graphic editing software in which this publication is formatted), in addition to moderating the oral debates in presential sessions and the virtual debate on Facebook.

### EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIP: ideas competition for a real problem

As the responsible for Architectural Design III-UBI in the last few years, and with a clear idea about the experimental studio I thought that course should be, I suggested that there should be at least one external partnership a year. That was how often those partnerships happened in the 2008-2009, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years, while only in the first semester of the 2011-2012 school year it was possible to carry out two external partnerships. In all cases, the proposals were developed in an internal competition system within the course, in groups of two students. At the end of the deadline, all teams handed in a technical brief, together with an A1 competition poster (portrait format) and the models that each team found necessary. All

of this material was subject to academic assessment. Meanwhile, the poster and the model/s were on public display on the day of the Competition, as a basis for the jury to select the winning proposals.

Next, we present a summarized report of each of them.

**Program:** Boidobra Interpretive Centre for Traditional Arts headquarters.

**Partners:** Boidobra Folklore Dance Group, Beira Serra Association.

**School Year:** 2009-2010.

In this case, the partnership was an initiative of the Boidobra Folklore Dance Group and of the Beira Serra Association. With a program to accommodate the Center's headquarters and with two ruined houses to rehabilitate for that purpose, these associations contacted the Architecture Degree course of the University of Beira Interior to suggest a partnership in order to develop ideas that might be useful in shaping their program (an information space and a traditional products shop, rooms for temporary and permanent exhibitions, a media space, an archive and item maintenance area, etc.). The assignment was not aimed at any specific course, but it was suggested that Architectural Design III should take it on.

The program's complexity was somewhat below the goals that had been set for that semester, which was already completely defined, so including the partnership meant changing the initial scheme. However, we accepted the challenge, as we considered that is was important for the students to deal with a program that, for its requirements, exceeded the total area of the two ruined houses. Besides, because the partners were from the region where the university is located, there would be many possibilities of interacting with them, of carrying out visits to the buildings, architectural and photographic surveys, etc. Regarding the course, the only condition, in order to avoid altering the semester's Schedule, was that the architectural proposals for this partnership, at the level of ideas, should be developed in only six weeks within an ideas competition system and in groups of two students.

The work stages that followed Architectural Design III-UBI classes were:

1) the public display of the works and the selection of the winning proposals, in the university's facilities (fig. 2 a-b-c).

On that day, each element of the jury, composed by the course's teachers, partners' representatives and guest teachers (from the university and external ones), had to choose three works. The more than twenty who were chosen gave a five-minute verbal account and also answered some questions posed by the partners. Following that, the jury decided again, choosing the three finalist proposals.

For the students this was also a learning stage, as none of the teams knew which ones would be chosen, the kind of questions they might have to answer and the attitude that the jury members who were not

part of the course, representing 5 of the competitions' total of 8 votes, would have.

2) the public display of all the proposals at the facilities of the Boidobra Parish Council.

All the proposals were displayed during a week so the Boidobra community would get to know them, as a prelude to the following event, which closed this exhibition.



Figure 2. External partnership as an ideas competition for the headquarters of CIATB: a) competition advertisement; b) 2nd place; c) display and selection of works at the university's facilities; d-e) divulging in the local press and final public ceremony in Boidobra.

3) a public closing ceremony, in the town center (fig. 2 d-e).

On that night, the authors of the three finalist proposals presented their ideas before the Boidobra residents who could then ask questions to the finalists in order to get to know the ideas better. The ceremony ended with a performance by the Boidobra Folklore Dance Group and with a town party, in which the authors of the proposals, the partners and the future users of the Boidobra Interpretive Centre for Traditional Arts were able to exchange experiences.

**Program:** Equipments for the Duppigheim Park, Boidobra.

**Partners:** Boidobra Parish Council, Beira Serra Association.

**School Year:** 2010-2011.

In this case, the partnership initiative came from the teachers who, however, did not have a specific program that needed to be developed. Initially we though about contacting other organizations, in order not to resort to the same partners again. However, having seen the open-mindedness of the Boidobra community to work together with the Architectural Design III-UBI students in the previous partnership and considering the lack of flexibility of the other organizations that had been contacted, we decided to get together again in a partnership with the Beira Serra Association and the Boidobra Parish Council.

The partners showed interest in receiving ideas for a disassemblable scenery for the events that are regularly held in that space (fig. 3 a). However, this scenery was not enough to achieve the academic goals for the semester, so we suggested adding, to the scenery program, a set of pavillions with specific functions: a tourist information stand with an external sales space, a multipurpose pavillion, a media library with an external reading area and an exhibition space that should have a connection with the scenery. To our surprise, the partners accepted the challenge of this remarkable increase in the program they expected us to develop.

When the proposals, which had been developed in five weeks, were ready, they were publicly displayed in the university's facilities (fig. 3 b-c-d), in order to carry out the selection of the finalists by means of a jury with similiar characteristics to the previous one. In this case, the interesting thing about the partnership had to do with the partners' attitude when choosing the proposals. That is, from the course's point of view, we though that partners from a very traditional and small-scaled village would have a conventional perspective when the time came to choose between the ideas for their main park. Despite that, throughout the creative process carried out in class, we encouraged the students to feel completely free while developing their ideas because, once again, we had to make the learning interests prevail over the partners' interests. As it was a work being developed under a competition system, each team was responsible for the kind of proposal that would be submitted,

taking the risks of being excluded in the first selection stage if the partners considered that their proposals didn't respect the space, that they exceeded the occupiable area, that the visual impact exceeded what the traditional Boidobra community could accept.

As one can imagine, when the works selection day came we, the course's teachers, knew exactly which works to choose, but our preconceptions about the partners led us sadly to think that their choice would take a different direction. We were wrong. The part-



Figure 3. External partnership as an ideas competition for equipments for the Duppigheim Park: a) site visit with the partners; b) competition advertisement; c) 1st place; d) display and selection of the works at the university's facilities.

ners were impressed by a set of risky but unique proposals (fig. 3 c). There was no unanimity, but we were very close to achieving it. For the students, this was an extremely useful experience, which allowed them – at a small scale, as is that of an internal competition in a university from the interior area of the country – to experience the fact that, in a competition, the initial strategy weighs a lot and that any strategy they propose may be valid as long as they have the conviction to take it to the end. In this case, the ones who took risks won. Of course that anything could have happened, but the lesson was stamped on everyone's memory in a very didactic way.

**Program:** Mobile housing structures for a thematic pedestrian pathway.

**Partner:** Fundão City Council.

**School Year:** 2011-2012.

With similar principles to the previous case, we proposed a partnership to the Fundão City Council. In this case, we asked for a list of concerns that they had at that time and we chose one of them, which fitted almost perfectly in the course's goals: mobile housing units for a touristic pedestrian pathway (which is meant to be launched soon), connected with the concept of transhumance, one of the region's typical activities. To finish adjusting the theme with the course, the only thing missing was to include the notion of "system", which completed the program's conditions.

The mechanisms for divulging the proposals were also agreed at the beginning of this partnership, stipulating that, at the end of the work and after selecting the proposals, the finalist ones would integrate a travelling exhibition in the region engaged with transhumance.

However, after the results of the work selection (fig. 4 A-b-c), in which the finalists were six and not three as in the previous cases, the partners asked for the travelling exhibition to include all the proposals, considering the diversity of ideas that were being offered in the almost 45 assessed proposals. After the opening of the travelling exhibition's first stage (fig. 4 D), the mayor of fundão suggested carrying out a new selection, in order to build one of the displayed prototypes at full-scale, with the adjustments that would obviously be necessary for such experiment. The door remained open and we were invited to establish a new partnership in the following semester.

**Program:** Design of objects for public space.

**Partner:** Fundão City Council.

**School Year:** 2011-2012.

In parallel with the previous *partnership*, it was also agreed with the Fundão City Council to carry out a series of interventions in the city's public space. This *partnership* was developed within the framework of the course's extracurricular activities program (funded by the University of Beira Interior and the Santander Totta Bank), specifically in the

workshop 1 "Design of objects for public space" (fig. 5 a), which was 40 hours long. Both this workshop and workshop 2 "Artistic interventions in public space" were presented as free choice credits, in which



Figure 4. External *partnership* as an ideas competition for mobile housing structures for a thematic pedestrian pathway: a) competition advertisement; b) 1st place; c) display and selection of works at the university's facilities; d) display at *A Moagem*'s facilities, Fundão.

the *Architectural Design III-UBI* students, choosing one workshop or the other, would replace one of the works from the course's plan.

This work had no predefined program, so all the proposals ended up being completely different. After a week of seclusion and intensive



Figure 5. External *partnership* as an ideas competition for the design of objects for public space, Fundão: a) workshop advertisement; b) "Reflecting the city" proposal; c) ideas lab; d) presentation of one of the proposals, "Timeless".

work (5 c-d), nine experimental proposals came up, some of which are currently being patented and built for the spaces that they were intended for (fig. 5 b).

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

Although the scope of the students' work limits itself to producing ideas – without overlapping or conflicting with the duties of professional architects –, the experience of dealing with real

problems, with real *partners*, takes them to a new pedagogical dimension, in which the decision making process is no longer relative, becoming the boundary between everything and nothing.

In another sense, the quality and interest of the proposals may allow obtaining funding, from the *partners*, to build prototypes that give rise to a new learning stage, where students will have to adapt more or less conceptual solutions to the economic, constructive and technological reality.

However, for the *partnership* to be consolidated as a work system in *Architectural Design* classes, preserving the students' intellectual production, there is the need to study the issue of copyrights and of how the ideas provided by students are integrated and recognized in a final proposal. Is it possible to "reward" the students by integrating them in the professional teams who develop that final proposal, for example? In any case, the external *partners* must, above all, respect the intellectual property of their academic associates, so that their rights aren't violated, nor seen by third parties as unfair competition within the architectural market.

Meanwhile, each semester's internal *partnership* implies the presence of an average of 60 students a day in sessions that, normally, are optional and don't have an attendance record. In many sessions, a maximum of 75-80 students (out of 90) is reached. This shows that, when they are properly encouraged and integrated in the course's production of contents and resources, the students are able to react positively and constructively to challenges, even when there are no obligations.

We believe in this model and we have concentrated all our efforts in it, trying to achieve excellence while teaching *Architectural Design*.

Three years of intensive work with *Architectural Design III* students allow us to confirm the utility of the *partnership* as a pedagogical strategy for teaching *Architectural Design*. Three internal *partnerships* and four external *partnerships* provide clear evidence about the increased motivation produced in the students when they carry out works beyond the academic sphere[1].

**ENDNOTES**

1    Other proposals in the ACSA International Conference showed that the pedagogical strategy presented in this paper is not an isolated case, but another link in a new trend of *Architectural Design* teaching in a changing world and society. Regarding the internal *partnership* philosophy, objectives and methodology, see Hunt, J., "Design as a form of Research: The role of Explanation and Argumentation in the Preparation of Design Projects that Represent Knowledge Contributions" (Auckland); Madrazo, L., "Networking Learning Processes: A Virtual Campus to Support Housing Studies" (Barcelone). Regarding the design work based on real programs/problems, connected with the community and/or constructive reality, see Anderson, N., "Public Interest Design: A Vehicle for Change in Architectural Education and Practices" (Iowa); Genis, M., Casals, A., González, J. L., "Learning Architectural Restoration Through Cooperative Working Strategies" and Madrazo, L., Cojo, A., Rivera, O., "Participatory Analysis of the Liging Environment: the Plus Ultra" (Barcelone); MacLaren, A., "Teambuild UK: New Formats for Delivery of Learning in Construction" (Edinburg); Vandenhende, K., "How can Students Learn to Integrate Form and Construction?" (Leuven).