The "How" is Next
Alternative Practices and Practicing Alternatively

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For the last seven years, the course Alternative Practices: The City, and the Design Laboratory (d-Lab) at the IE School of Architecture and Design have served as vehicles to test a shifting of academic production from its more conventional role as a tool for learning within the protected environment of the classroom towards a field engagement experience, understanding reality and the coexistence with other agents as a strategic component of the design and production processes. This paper aims to explore several observations and results elaborated during these years, testing pedagogical approaches and community outreach in a specific urban environment.

THE "CITY"

Countless articles, books, and presentations mention that people in the world live now, mostly, in cities. That milestone, theorized extensively in the past with vivid images of futuristic scenarios, is now our present. Crossing this threshold has positioned cities into the center of disciplinary discussion: conferences, articles, studio briefs and many other fora for debate are focused, almost obsessively, on "what is next" for the city. We witness every day a debate over new methods and concepts trying to grasp, predict, and guide the pressing issue of the unstoppable growth of our urban environments. As we know, from 2009 onward, and for the first time in history, more than 50% of the world's population lives in cities. But, what cities?

Literature about the city is flooded with an extensive catalog of city types describing a current or future state of the art of our urban environments. The Eco-city, the Sustainable City, the Smart City, and many others illustrate a characterization of our urban environments based on a performative condition. The list is long and diverse as for what the city aims or claims to be, however, these types seem to encompass a certain scale in order to live up to these labels and respond to their goals or expectations. Population and institutional size, and a certain generic condition seem to be, often, fundamental qualities to be able to operate within these categorizations. But then, is that "the city"?

Dissecting the numbers, out of the 54% of current urban dwellers, around 23% live in cities of less than 300.000 inhabitants not always able to deal with the complexities and resources needed to achieve the city types mentioned above. The relation between size and performance might not be always directly proportional, and there might be another conditioning factors to take into account, but global pressing issues like sustainability, or financial and political global agendas, do place bigger cities at the center of the discussion. While literature, debate and economic resources are focused on medium or large cities, a 23% of urban dwellers often struggles to define its present and its future, receiving little attention from the disciplinary field. How are those cities made?

Standardization and rationalization of resources, production modes, and conceptual frames were victorious "inventions" of the 20th century with an enormous impact on the development and growth of cities. However, this systematic approach that has brought

Figure 1. Students from the course of Alternative Practices: The City working on data collection (Photo by author)

endless benefits for humankind, sometimes works under the principle of exclusion. Everything that does not fit within its frame falls into a limbo of uncertainty, and frequently, away from dominating theory and research. Small cities with scarce economic and technical resources, a changing productive and cultural profile, or those involved in complex processes of population change or depopulation, struggle to find a theoretical frame or a practical strategy able to propel, or even to define, its agenda.

Decades ago, the discipline of urbanism concluded that urban plans had a limited capacity as a tool for city-making facing the escalating complexities of our current reality. Nevertheless, sometimes, it is all small cities have for projecting their future, or for addressing its more immediate present. The rusted tools of zoning and regulations are still capable of, somehow, organizing the physical urban environment, but cannot often grasp efficiently some other phenomena that relate to human behavior, socio-economic fluctuations or institutional organization. Without a supporting theory, more comprehensive urban technical tools, or human resources to deal with complex scenarios, these cities move forward slowly and as they can. In Spain, where the alarming depopulation of small and middle scale towns has been growing now for twenty years, and has started to reach frightening levels, city making in small-to-medium urban environments has become a politically and socially pressing issue which is no longer avoidable, but is also extremely difficult to address.

ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES OF, AND IN, ACADEMIA

The previous observations are the foundation of the course Alternative Practices: The City within the fifth year of the Bachelor in Architecture at IE School of Architecture and Design. The course, one of five carrying the title "Alternative Practices", and dealing with fields like "Design", "Landscape and Environment" "Digital Studies" or "Management and Entrepreneurship," was implemented in order to offer our future graduates a perspective on the multiple possible paths in the career of an architect. In this context, the notion of the

"alternative" functioned almost as a synonym of diversity, of "otherness," opening possibilities on the most conventional role of an architect, especially in Spain where the model of the architect/designer of buildings still reigns supreme.

Much has been written about the notion of "Alternative Practices" as for referring to non-traditional ways of operation within the architectural field. In May 2009, the JAE[1] titled its issue #4 as "Alternative Architecture-Alternative Practices", producing a critical summary of case studies around the meaning of alternative as opposed to the norm and the conventional, and giving a broad perspective on an extended field of practice. Later on, the book Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture[2] by Awan, Schneider and Till , covered a vast landscape on different approaches to professional practice and a diverse map of relationships modes between architects, clients and social and cultural environments. Although this last one consciously and convincingly renounced the title of alternative practices to characterize its research and the objective of its survey, its content offers a mesmerizing assembly of unorthodox, or even unconventional modes of architectural production. These publications, out of many other more, illustrate the divergent and diverse map of architectural practice in current times, and how professionals have, out of urgency, conviction of exploration, paved an alternative perspective on the operational modes of the discipline.

In the case of our course, and as a way of taking off from the mere idea of diversity of professional paths, the notion of "alternative practices" within the academic field triggered a series of questions: could Alternative Practices: The City, as an environment for developing academic content, be alternative at all? And if so, what was the norm or convention we were confronted with? Could we be alternative when our work lives in the protected environment of academic, and always generous, speculation? In an academic environment, how to define "alternative" different from "experimental" so not to fall into a pure intellectual exercise? Perhaps, there is still some room for discussing on how alternatively we can operate within academia.

ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES: THE CITY

The course of Alternative Practices: The City focuses on a small urban settlement: Segovia, in Spain, specifically, in its historical quarter. The IE School of Architecture and Design, is located in this small city of 53,000 inhabitants, named UNESCO world heritage in 1984, and in the high-speed train, 28 minutes away from Madrid. Like many small cities, the intricate formula of intense local and regional politics, small budgets and limited human resources challenges the capacity of the municipal structures to respond to pressing demands such as population loss, cultural and social changes and challenges, and, especially in this little town, the conflictive relation between tourism as an economic activity and the right to the city from its citizens. Back to some previous arguments, Segovia falls into this limbo of cities that do not fit well within mainstream theory of "what is next" for our urban environments, struggling with a definition not even of its future, but often of its complex present.

Operating in this context put us in an interesting position where the relevant question does not seem to be what city this *is*, as escapes to mainstream, theorized typologies, but rather a more urgent query about how this city is *made*, today. If the idea of "what" seems to suggest an urge for a precise definition, the idea of "how" overpasses that limiting notion to focus on the more hopeful and direct capacity of the action and its possible multiple effects of its doing. Then, and considering we are operating within an academic environment, the definition of "alternative" is not so much about opposing the norm, or confusing its meaning with experimentation, but rather a vehicle to re-contextualize the focus and position of our academic work and to explore its possibilities to operate beyond the benevolent classroom realm. Rather than focusing on offering an alternative project of city, we centered our attention on the relationship between tools of inquiry, feasible fields of operation of our "doing", and the often-limiting boundaries between academic production and operative institutional structures within the city. Our take on alternative practices was then not so much about an alternative reality as a vision of the city's future, but rather in placing us in an alternative position.

The historical quarter of Segovia loses around 80 inhabitants per year, over a total of 2,500, and a high percentage of them elderly, relying intensively on nearby social and cultural services. The permanent exile of population towards the outskirts of the city or to bigger cities, and the complexities of living a modern life in a medieval urban fabric, have left a 40% of its buildings empty, which counts for about 55,000 sq. meters encompassing residential and public institutions like a library, a hospital, or other services that continue leaving the area. With almost a million tourist per year, the most representative part of the city of Segovia is dangerously placed on a threshold of becoming, mostly, a tourist destination rather than a living neighborhood.

In terms of tools for city-making, this part of the city, and due to its UNESCO protection, is ostensibly directed by the Special Plan for the Historic Areas of Segovia (PEAHIS). The plan, however, has been on the table of political negotiation for the last 10 years, paralyzing any possible transformation or re-activation of the urban fabric due to the uncertainty over urban regulations, and creating a feeling of social and cultural instability. The course therefore focused on how to "make city" within this complex scenario, trying to move away from more conventional tools of planning and focusing on more human, social, and cultural phenomena. In this context, the relevant issue was not what city this is or could be, whether it is or could be sustainable, or smart, or any other characterization, but rather on a more urgent question about how the city could be made.

FROM ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES TO PRACTICING ALTERNATIVELY

For working on the context of alternative practices within the academic environment the course established that research should be done in the field, engaging with different stakeholders, public and private city agents, and the tangible and intangible modes of operations of the city. Research, then, was not only an act of gathering

information but also an act of social and interdisciplinary interaction, particularly useful for a highly international student body, where varied cultural identities usually frame misleading assumptions on city-making and city-living. In practical terms, the classroom moved outside, where we conducted interviews and surveys, searched for documentation, and recollected visual data (Figure 1). This field engagement produced an interesting body of knowledge, mostly non-existent in the city's institutions due to the scarcity of human resources for this kind of labor intensive and socially engaged task, but also due to our capacity, as an academic course, to obtain, process, synthetize and transform information. Our first step, of knowing the city was simultaneously an understanding of its material body as well as its multifaceted "mood", made of the collision of the multiple perspectives of its inhabitants, institutions and intangible forces that produce the urban environment.

Under different guidelines, triggers and motivations, we were able to produce some projects that respond to this idea of the "how", how to make city involving not only pressing demands, but also identifying and proposing a logistic of whom would the necessary agents to move these projects forward. The "how" was then constituted by the overlapping of a possible "what to do" and a fundamental "who will, or could, do it".
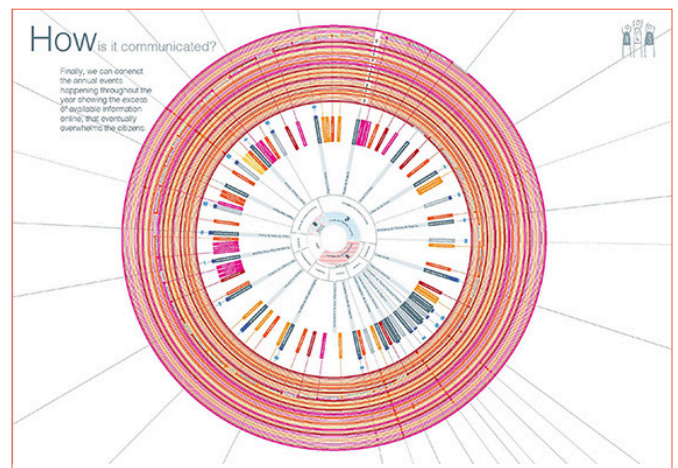

Figure 2. Caprile, Letizia and Virginia Junquera. "Networking Segovia". Project developed during the course of Alternative Practices: The City. Fall Semester 2015 (Image from the students final presentation)

In this spirit, one project studied the functioning of information communication (Figure 2), revealing a confusing overlap of institutions involved in it and the misuse of resources, proposing alternatives for better synergies among different organisms and governmental levels to boost efficiency and create a more effective outreach[3]. Another project worked over the often-neglected perception of the city (Figure 3), focusing especially in the international students population and the many spatial and cultural shocks they experience,

proposing strategies for a better assimilation of this growing body of new citizens, identifying agents for change within the university and in the city[4]. A different one, addressed the very controversial and problematic topic of mobility, working on a proposal that addresses the complexities of a physical medieval fabric and its struggling relation with sustainability, but also the frightening perception of the effects of pedestrianizing, or changing the current map of movement of the neighborhood[5]. The projects, these and many others, joined a diverse range of observations like human behavior and perception, physical, social and cultural space, population identities and needs, management and channels of information, but also proposed a logistic approach as a gear assembly of public and private agents which by agency or interest, could be involved in their production. We acted, through our projects, as some sort of intermediate agents that strategically connect opportunity and potential, and the city as a public and private institutional structure with the city as a community of human relations.

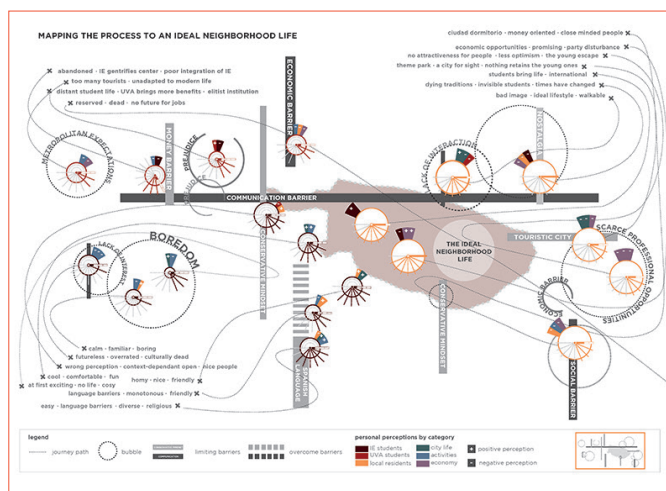Our work revealed many possible projects but more importantly, it

Figure 3. Lagard, Nathalie and Deiene González. "Breaking Barriers" Project developed during the course of Alternative Practices: The City. Fall Semester 2016 (Image from the students' final presentation)

revealed that the acting municipal structures were unable to gather, link, and translate into projects the complex portrait we were able to scrutinize and assemble through our research skills, our capacity for synthetizing information and our naiveté as an architecture school. These are, unfortunately, luxuries that rarely fit within the public administration of a small town. However, the format of an academic course has a limited reach and lifespan, and although the proposals uncovered a promising list of possibilities, it soon became clear that if we aimed to project our school's production outward, beyond the protected environment of the classroom, our approach to Alternative Practices needed to translate into a mode of practicing alternatively.

D-LAB. DESIGN LABORATORY

It is both fascinating and unfortunate how little of the academic production from architecture schools--with all their good intentions and sharp observations—reaches external agents or reality to become something other than disciplinary or intellectual exercises. The d-Lab intends to create a bridge between academic production and field engagement through an interinstitutional collaboration between the university and the municipal government. For the last six ¬years, the d-Lab has worked with the City Hall elaborating projects that respond to a broad range of demands and pressing issues, focusing, fundamentally on those projects that might not otherwise be covered by the currently acting institutional structures of the city.

The definition of a laboratory as an environment for experimentation and production has been widely explored and implemented in architecture schools. Focusing on a range of interests from material research like C.A.S.T.[6] at University of Manitoba, to more socially engaged ones like the Yale Building Project[7] among others, labs often act as extensions of the academic curriculum for the production of material, disciplinary, and cultural knowledge. The d-Lab works in a similar fashion, as a platform for widening the students' skills and engagement with reality. However, the d-Lab has a particularity, as it acts as a liaison between the city's demands and needs for projects with the institutional structures able to support their production. Our knowledge through the course of Alternative Practices, the data base we built over the years, the different agents we have interacted with, and the notions emerging from it became a valuable know-how foundation for assembling an operation mode. Blending academic research with field work, the naiveté of school production with real demands and regulations, and the acquisition of knowledge with professional training, the d-Lab has become an alternative partner of the city, free from any political agenda and more agile in its way of operating in a complex environment.

THE "CASA DE LA LECTURA"

Since its beginning in 2013, the lab has collaborated with the City Hall of Segovia in the production of several projects for the city, targeting, fundamentally, the social and cultural re-activation of the urban fabric of the old city.

In June 2016, an empty and robust 16th-century building in the middle of the old town was transferred from the state to the municipal administration (Figure 4). For the City Hall this was, somehow, a poisoned gift: one more empty building to add to the already extensive list of unused properties within the medieval urban tissue, and limited financial and institutional resources to undertake such a project. The Department of Culture proposed that we work on a project that dealing with those conditions and constraints, could surpass the immediate basic re-conditioning of the building. The project came already with its proper name: "Casa de la Lectura", something like a "the house for reading," with the intention of surpassing the objectives of a conventional municipal library. Our challenge then was how to respond to this objective, but also how to assume a project that

would act as a condenser of much-needed, social and cultural links for the old town.

Figure 4. Casa de la Lectura (Photo by Naomi Njonjo)

Briefs aiming to challenge conventional approaches to program, or dealing with socio-economic conditions were already in our classrooms. The unprecedented here resided in the synergies we needed to propose and create for moving the project from idealistic, good intentions to a more inclusive and always exciting reality. So, we analyzed our strengths and skills as an architecture school while simultaneously understanding, over the course of the project, the difference between standing in an academic environment and in being involved in a city project. We focused, therefore, on three conditions that frame production processes within architectural education, to understand the necessary translation from an academic project to a real one.

The design process in architecture education is mostly undisturbed by external conditions other than those established in the brief. This comforting position, aiming to facilitate certain learning processes, is also a utopia as architecture generally operates in an intertwined field of desires and decisions that are not always rational or purely disciplinary. Instead, for this project, we engaged diverse stakeholders that demanded different responses to support and redirect the objectives of the project. This scenario, in which we were one out of many agents, became a definitive factor in our design process. Our approach was thus apolitical insofar as we did not identify ourselves with a specific agenda, while simultaneously political by acting, through our design process, as a catalyst of diverse perspectives and positions within the city.

In academia, we insist on the capacity of narrative to organize an argument or thread of thoughts capable of supporting our decisions and securing a positive response. Narrative is about engagement and through it, we link the intangible, to give meaning and significance to space, with the tangible understood as its material translation. Public institutional structures often manage an intentionally unspecific

discourse, as it must demonstrate that it operates at several levels: the social, the financial, and the political. In our involvement in the project, the narrative became a fundamental asset to validate our role within the inter-institutional collaboration. While the government contributed with the non-specific, general perspective to respond to citizen demands, we, as a professionally focused, external agent, contributed with a highly specific perspective of know-how backed by disciplinary competence.

Figure 5. Wall of Letters. Fabrication at IE School of Architecture and Design. IE University. May 2017 (Photo by author)

We operate in a complex world where the division of labor and knowledge is highly segregated. When it comes to the material processes involved in an architectural project, and although an architect in Spain has an intense training in construction, students usually move within the boundaries of the theoretical. Material fabrication is frequently produced through scaled models, not always capable of simulating real materiality, spatial effect or processes. In our collaboration for the Casa de la Lectura, material processes and fabrication became an intrinsic part of our work, linking financial constraints with pedagogical reasons, as a vehicle to translate the projected with the produced, and the designed with the material (Figure 5 and 6). This overlapping condition of pedagogical method and the financial constraints, translated into a creative endeavor for connecting traditional construction techniques (like the "esgrafiado segoviano", a very cherished symbol of identity of the town that covers with geometric patterns of plaster most of the facadesof the city), the available resources--ours and theirs, material and human--and the ambitions of the project.

Sixteen months after the transfer of the building to the municipal government, and after years of closing facilities in the historic center, the Casa de la Lectura opened its doors in an attempt to become an invigorating agent for the decimated body of the old town of Segovia (Figure 7)
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Figure 6. Casa de la Lectura. Wall of Letters. (Photo by Whit Preston Photography)
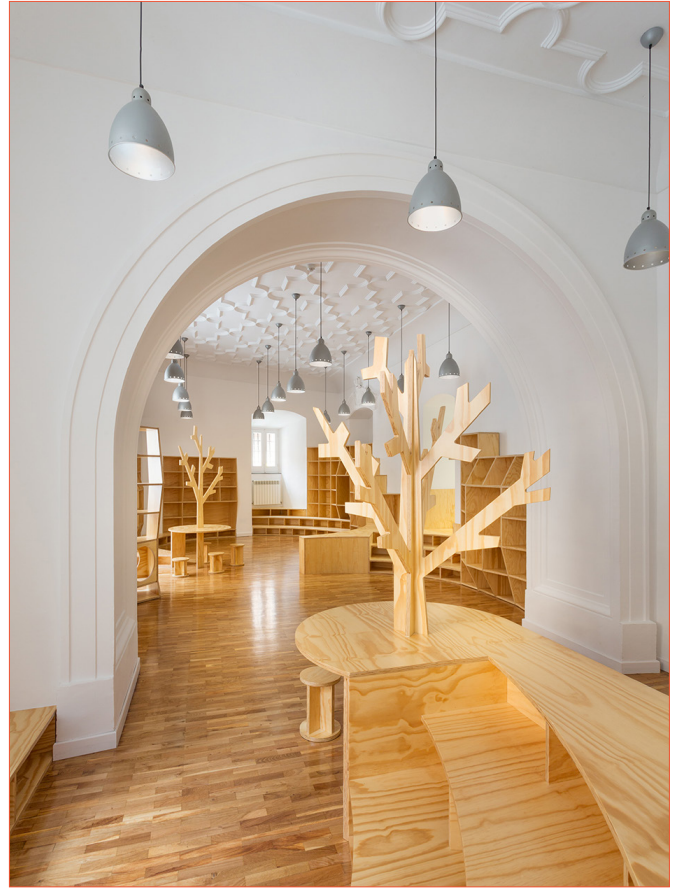

Figure 7. Casa de la Lectura. The Park of Books. (Photo by Whit Preston Photography)

AFTERMATH: NUMBERS, PRAISE AND CRITICISM OF PRACTICING ALTERNATIVELY

Six months after its inauguration, opening only from Thursday to Sunday, the Casa de la Lectura registered more than 37,000 visits in a town of 53,000 inhabitants. The high attendance at activities, requests from organizations from the whole town to produce events there, and the general functioning of the facility are good indicators of its success. After more than ten years of a permanent drain of services and urban facilities, the Casa met its promise of becoming a center for social and cultural revitalization (Figure 8).

It would be naive to take complete credit for this accomplishment as this was a much-needed center for cultural and social interaction. However, it is also fair to acknowledge our pride of having been part of its development. However, it is also fair to acknowledge our pride of having been part of its development, and the praise and criticism that its spatial organization, aesthetics, and our presence triggered in a town of colliding conservative and progressive perspectives. The controversy made us part of the community. The aftermath of a project should not only be measured only in numbers or in qualities. In this case, and for us, the aftermath resides in our ability to break the boundaries of our own institutional purity. As a school of architecture,

Figure 8. Casa de la Lectura. Books Park. Presentation Book "Sexperimentando" by Nayara Malnero. Conversations with the author (Courtesy of Department of Culture. City of Segovia)

we attempted to propel our academic production outward, re-evaluating our modes of operation and somehow pushing, blurring, or erasing the boundaries between education and practice by practicing alternatively.

Notes

1. Flowers, Michael, Judson Moore and Lori Ryker, "Introduction," *Journal of Architecture Education* 62, Issue 4 (May 2009): 4-5

2. Awan, Nishant, Tatjiana Schneider and Jeremy Till. *Spatial Agency. Other Ways of Doing Architecture*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011

3. Project developed for the course Alternative Practice: The City. Fall Semester 2015 by Letizia Caprile and Virginia Junquera. "Networking Segovia"

4. Project developed for the course Alternative Practice: The City. Fall Semester 2016 by Nathalie Lagard nd Deiene González. "Breaking Barriers"

5. Project developed for the course Alternative Practice: The City. Fall Semester 2016 by Claudia Maier and Laura Hernández. "Mobility Plan"

6. C.A.S.T. is the Centre for Architectural Structures and Technology founded by Mark West at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Manitoba

7. The Yale Building Project was started in 1967 by Charles Moore as a compulsory part of the Architecture Program at the Yale School of Architecture.