Dispatch

Education as Acceptance: Including Differences in Studio Pedagogy to Achieve Spatial Justice

CRISTINA MURPHY
Morgan State University, USA

CARLA BRISOTTO
University of Florida, USA

In 2003, Melvin Mitchell, director of one of the United States' major historically Black schools of architecture and planning, noted that "[Black] schools must be at the forefront of establishing the theoretical as well as the practical rapprochement between Black Architects and the Black America they were spawned from" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 208). The school – at Morgan State University – added history of Black architects and historical preservation of Black neighborhoods courses (Kroiz, 2013), and devised a curriculum to create a social agenda and endorse design building practices through which to advance socio-economic development and address social inequity.

One intervention was an experimental design studio called "Global Design in Local Italy," to expose architecture graduate students to the social and spatial (in)justice faced by African migrants in Northern Italy. Studio installations opened a space of engagement between students and migrants in a service-learning curriculum.

According to the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB, 2020) in the United States, in 2020 two percent of licensed architects were African Americans. The learning experience stressed this minority condition as a design opportunity, building a learning space around empathy, a shared understanding of experiences of exclusion and inequity, and ambitions for emancipation.

Correspondence Address: Cristina Murphy, Graduate Program in Architecture, Morgan State University, Baltimore, MD, 21251, USA; email: cristina.murphy@morgan.edu

Advancing the school's "regional, national, and global outlook," as described in Morgan State University website,[1] the studio explored global migration across national borders and its impact on cities. Inside and outside their condition of being minority students in their home country, students were supported to see themselves through migrants' eyes. Design grew from comparing the differences and similarities in the conditions of visiting, living, and dwelling of three separate groups: students, migrants, and locals. After meeting the migrants and native residents, students learned how to design democratic spaces and built a small installation to showcase their learning. The studio rooted its philosophy in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018), following his theory that emancipation starts from an individual journey where the student learns about their cultural condition, and then develops strategies to change it internally and in their society. This philosophy advances Mitchell's agenda for an education that introduces "community and activist design practices" (Kroiz, 2013, p. 213). The student both acquires individual awareness and learns to inhabit a new social activist role as an architecture professional. The educator, too, adapts the teaching experience by learning more about the context students live in, helping them visualize individual problems, advocating for their awareness and willingness to take a professional, creative, and social stand in their design work. In this process, as Freire noted, "the teacher is no longer the one who teaches, but the one who is taught in dialogue with students… [The teacher] become responsible for a process in which [everyone] grows" (Freire, 2018, pp. 80-81). We developed Freire's horizontal educational experience into a circular relationship among teacher, student and community, because by including the community students were exposed to others' views, reflected on them, and developed their awareness of the world. We also followed John Dewey's (1915) advice to link education and society by recreating the greater community within the small community of the studio, providing an opportunity for students to practice tools that can advance social justice (Dwight & Eyler, 1994, pp. 81-82) in a highly diverse community.

Using the concept of co-design,[2] students, African migrants and local residents embarked on a spatial exploration process and collectively established a platform for engagement, exchange, confrontation and exposure to different point of views, including those of "people not trained in design" (Sanders & Stappers, 2008, p. 8). The requirements of diverse and multicultural cities can be addressed by planners and designers who know how to satisfy the needs of migrants and residents alike, so students were guided to understand the difficulties and insecurities created by a lack of

---

[1]See https://catalog.morgan.edu/content.php?catoid=11&navoid=705
[2]Co-design is a collaborative design thinking strategy that engages a group of experts in participatory design processes to identify problems and envision together their solutions. Experts are intended to be architects and planners, but also residents as experts of the local environment.

comprehensive immigration policies that create barriers to integration and lead to hostility and discrimination.

Learning took place in three main phases: an initial understanding of the studio methods and design focus, a spatial exploration of city and surroundings, and a co-design laboratory with the development of a final installation. Students prepared a literature review of readings on social urban equity, global design, and architectural installations before leaving for Italy, which prepared them for the studio's pedagogical aims, explained the advantages and challenges of a studio abroad, and introduced them to the methodology they would use to engage with migrants. Then they used the literature review on-site in a group activity, which enabled them to practically apply the theoretical approaches they had learned about.

In phase two, students explored the city and surroundings, meandering freely and independently as they created a mental image of the region and its social and the spatial relations. They were exposed to the diversity of the dense region of Veneto and prepared themselves to work on the third phase, an inquiry into migration. Lastly, students prepared an assignment focused on specific sites in the city, which required observation, understanding and translation of places, communities and current urban migration into text, diagrams, maps, and models (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Presentation of the observation exercise (photo: Cristina Murphy).

The learning objective of this exercise was to enable students to become familiar with their environments and initiate a conversation on people and place. Each day, they looked at who used which spaces, interactions between different people, and how and whether their spatial needs were responded to. As temporary inhabitants of that space, they learned to identify different categories of inhabitants, looking for differences rather than similarities, and in so doing placing themselves within their analysis.

In the third phase of the studio – the co-design laboratory – students confronted many challenges that moved the agenda in unexpected and unplanned directions, stretching our pedagogical models in the process. In this phase, we collaborated with a local non-profit organization that connected us with migrants from Ghana, Gambia, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast. They were young, male, full of dreams, and had moved to the global North to build something permanent for themselves. Some spoke Italian, most did not. Few had jobs. They needed "the papers," those documents that would allow them to be recognized, dignified, and make free choices.

Meeting them taught the students about security, privilege, and (not) belonging to a place. They started to ask where is one truly at home, when does one feel fully accepted, when can one start giving back to society – questions which then informed the formulation of their spatial design. Instead of starting with the preconception that there is a receiving country and a recipient culture, we asked a social justice inflected question: are we able to create a space where what matters is the exchanges between people? Would this synergy be called "global integration?" The meetings were carried out as a design charrette that included the ideas of designers and non-designers alike,[3] exposing future generations of architects to different perceptions, capacitating them to reflect on privilege and focus on respect, adaptation, and tolerance as key architectural ambitions.

Our commitment to circular pedagogy meant that the installation was designed for public exhibition and aimed to solicit reactions, comments, and feedback from the general public. This required that we occupy public space, which required the granting of official permission by the city council in accordance with Italian public land use law. Time constraints and lack of political support made this very difficult, and since we had also lost access to construction tools and a workshop, we had to steer our agenda toward a low-tech intervention that, while communicating a realistic local necessity and raising awareness, remained within achievable limits. The students and the migrants displayed their work in a pop-up performance in which migrants used soccer as a way to connect the different nationalities within their own small community (see Figure 2).

---

[3]A design charrette is a short, collaborative session where different stakeholders share ideas, and together explore broad diversity of design ideas.

Figure 2. Meeting between students, migrants, and locals discussing the location of the peripheral soccer field (photo: Cristina Murphy).

The intention of the mobile performance became the appropriation of public space, bringing the migrants' soccer to the center of the locals' spatial life, so rather than a built installation we used our bodies to appropriate a space in which we built a temporary scenography that unfolded to reveal the differences in spatial use between migrants and local residents, allowing us to show how interactions within space can become source of segregation – and to suggest possible new urban patterns that transform exclusion into urban integration. The charrete was centered around the idea of playing in space by moving through various stations (see Figure 3).

The mobile performance unrolled in a series of five play-stations stretching along a two-mile route. Participants wore colored t-shirts and delivered short choreographed performances along a curated route. We called the installation "Tutti giocano" (everyone plays) to stress the idea of playing as a connecting activity (see Figure 4), but also because the other meaning of the word "giocare" is to pretend to be someone else (see Figure 5). While experiencing each station, we started to depict new spaces and social environments in which diversities and difference could flourish. This process also led the students to realize their privileged status and the ease with which they had begun to move around spaces that migrants find difficult to manage. In their student evaluation one of our students reported:

The highlight that meant the most to me was when we received messages from the migrants in appreciation and gratitude for being involved in the performance. One reported: 'I am definitely happy today because it has been a while that I did not have this kind of fun LOL. Today I got it all at once… thank you all!' This meant a lot because the work we did was a push for social integration. We wanted the migrants to feel comfortable in the city and interact with the locals… the performance did just that! They were playing and speaking Italian with everyone. In the future, it would be nice to collaborate with this same group of individuals to get an update on their lifestyle and dig deeper into the integration process.
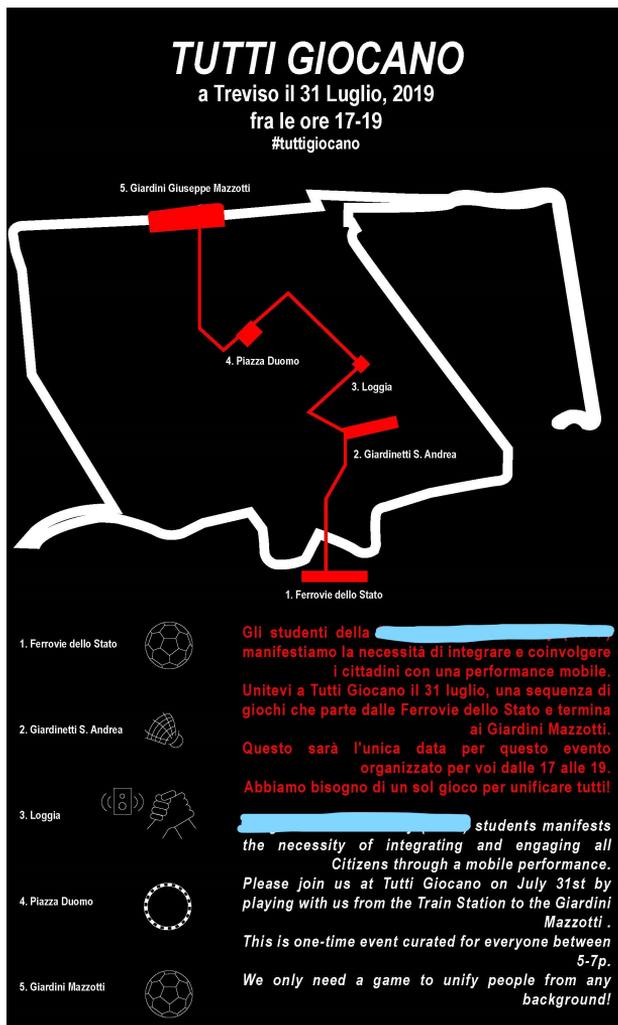
Figure 3. Visuals of the mobile performance distributed among the locals. (graphic: Cristina Murphy).

Figure 4. During the mobile performance students and migrants bonded in experiencing space together (photo: Cristina Murphy).

Figure 5. The playground and garden have been re-occupied to become a place of integration among locals and migrants (photo: Cristina Murphy).

Conclusion

The studio provided graduate students from a minority background with service-learning opportunities that taught them to design integrated and sustainable communities. The challenges that the studio faced reinforced our pedagogical commitment to circular education, as we adjusted the curriculum to overcome unexpected obstacles. Students learned from the community of migrants about turbulent social and spatial relationships, and the local and migrant communities actively co-designed a space. Our students also realized that they have privilege in comparison with migrants, supporting them to reflect on what it means to be an African American and an architect who can advance social justice in a spatially unequal world. The mobile and collective performance became a common platform through which students could reflect on their future roles, migrants could learn about their rights, and residents could see their city from a different perspective.

Acknowledgments

References

Bonnemaison, S., & Eisenbach, R.. (2009). *Installations by architects: Experiments in building and design.* Princeton Architectural Press.
Dewey, J. (1915). *The school and society.* The University of Chicago Press.
Dewey, J. (1963). *Experience and education.* Macmillan Owens.
Dwight, E. G. Jr., & Eyler, J. (1994). The theoretical roots of service-learning in John Dewey: Toward a theory of service-learning." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 1*(1), 81-82.
Florida, R. (2003). Cities and the creative class. *City & Community, 2*(1), 3-19.
Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. Bergman Ramos, Trans.). Bloomsbury Academic.

Kroiz, G. (2013). The manifesto off the shelf: Educating Black architects at Morgan State University. *Journal of Architectural Education 67*(2), 205-213.

La Cecla, F. (2014). *Contro L'Urbanistica.* Giulio Einaudi Editore.

Mitchell, M. (2003). *The crisis of the African-American architect: Conflicting cultures of architecture and (Black) power.* iUniverse.

NCARB (National Council of Architectural Registration Boards). (2020). *NCARB by the numbers, 2020.* https://www.ncarb.org/sites/default/files/2020NBTN_1.pdf

Owens, J. D., & Weigel. D. (2018). Addressing minority student achievement through service learning in a culturally relevant context. *Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education, 7*(1), 2-24.

Pearl, A. J., & Christensen R. K. (2017). First-year student motivations for service- learning: An exploratory investigation of minority student perceptions. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach & Engagement*, *21*(4), 117-137.

Sanders, E. B. N., & Stappers, P. J. (2008). Co-creation and the new landscapes of design. *CoDesign, 4*(1), 5-18.

Steen, M., Manschot, M., & De Koning, N. (2011). Benefits of co-design in service design projects. *International Journal of Design, 5*(2), 53-60.

Solnit, R. (2005). *Storia del camminare.* Bruno Mondadori.

Whitehead, C. (2016). *The Underground Railroad: A novel.* Doubleday.