

# Both of Stuff and Not: A Teaching Experience in the Contemporary Condition

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## KEYWORDS

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Architecture is a quite elusive discipline, both unleashed and restrained by a perennial calling into question of its own fundamentals. Being and becoming an architect means to cast a doubtful, unsatisfied, interrogative gaze on the world and especially on the world of architecture.

Teaching such a (self-) critical discipline is, therefore, an intrinsically impossible task. Of course, syllabuses include specific competencies such as drawing, history, structures, law, economics... but when it comes to integrating them into the architectural project, any fixed framework becomes questionable, and it is precisely this questioning that makes design architectural, offering that necessary potential which can turn mere building into architecture.

Though many teaching approaches still lean on assertive approaches, for instance aimed to specific languages' reproduction, major transformations — involving identities, conditions, and possibilities — affected the educational exchange. The power relationship between teachers and students is much less asymmetrical than before and, in some cases, even reversed. Many of us developed a disenchantment that is both cause and consequence of the dramatic lack of charisma we suffer in comparison to the previous generation: a condition further challenged by the huge impact of information technologies and the paradigm shift they propose in the way competencies and skills can be effectively transmitted and trained. Dramatic changes are also impacting the professional world and the whole building market, so that an increasing number of graduates will never run a professional practice as architects. Teaching architecture should therefore maintain acceptable levels in the education aimed to the usual disciplinary applications while turning it into a positive asset for those who will spend their design abilities in different, unpredictable manners and fields, hoping they will play a positive role beyond building and for the society at large.

Italy represents a 'privileged' vantage point to address these issues. From decades we 'produce' nearly half of the European graduates in architecture, and the numbers we have been dealing with in our daily routine (an average design studio of our schools includes normally more than fifty students) entail a teaching relationship that somehow anticipated the contemporary challenges. Therefore, the methodological tricks we developed to cope with our peculiar situation still make some sense in the present, general circumstances. My last teaching experience at the Politecnico of Turin can resume both these conditions and a possible strategy to address them.

The first design studio of the Bachelor in architecture has been thought of as an introduction to spatial comprehension

and manipulation, with about sixty students and sixty hours (which roughly means one hour per student, including lectures). I called this studio 'Copy & Paste' because learning to read usually precedes any writing ability. Copying is therefore the main tool to work out the project. Manipulating examples gives an instant contrast agent, selecting possibilities. Since self-teaching is a condition for architects, who are expected to cope with diversity and produce differences, students are asked to search and propose examples on their own along the ones provided by the teacher. However, the nuts and bolts of architectural imagination are hardly rationalizable and there is nothing that can substitute a drawing hand in front of you, displaying its thinking power; so my two assistants and I set up quick individual tutorials (the unsaid is probably the most important part of a design studio, something invaluable and irreplaceable by any virtual reality). The attempt is to foster a pluralist, interrogative attitude — any solution should be discovered within the design process, finding unstable and contingent consistencies — and a pragmatist (still modernist?) approach, aimed to an economy of form.

The relationship between words and things, of a narrative binding between the architectural projects and their reasons, acts as a main educational apparatus ('Copy & Paste' students were asked to imagine their clients' requests starting from randomly generated features). Discursive practices, which are intrinsically linear, act as contrast media for space imagination. In other words, they perform a 'critical' function even before a critical attitude has been trained and achieved. This triggers a mutual improvement of the ability to 'read' projects and to 'write' them as sets of logically organized operations.

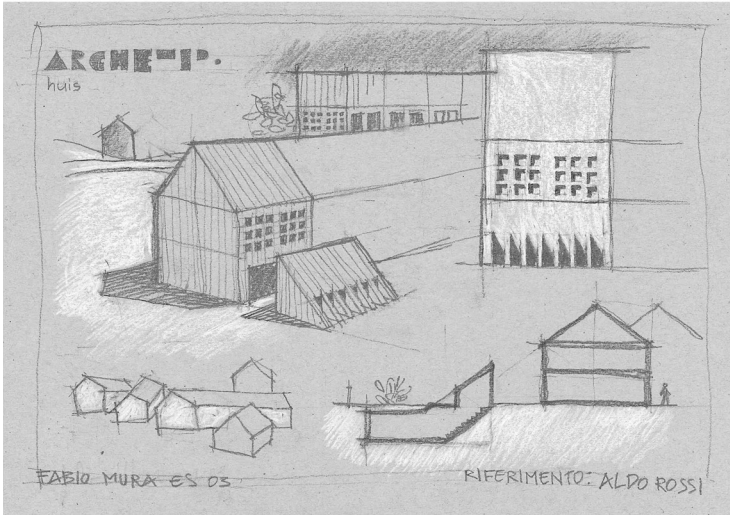
My intention is to enhance the students' critical, and especially self-critical, ability. A deeper theoretical awareness — along with the ability to translate the disciplinary toolbox into the mono-dimensional sequence of storytelling — is now crucial for architects also because of the phenomena of virtualization that even this profession so strongly intertwined in materiality is undergoing. The more information technology provides prosthetic applications, erasing distances in time and space, the less built answers and authorial skills will be requested. The export of our specific gaze into the immaterial is therefore strategic to keep us in touch with 'reality' and to get commissions. Both of stuff and not.

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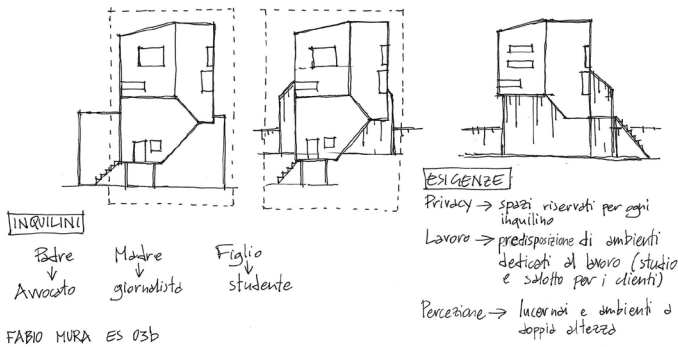


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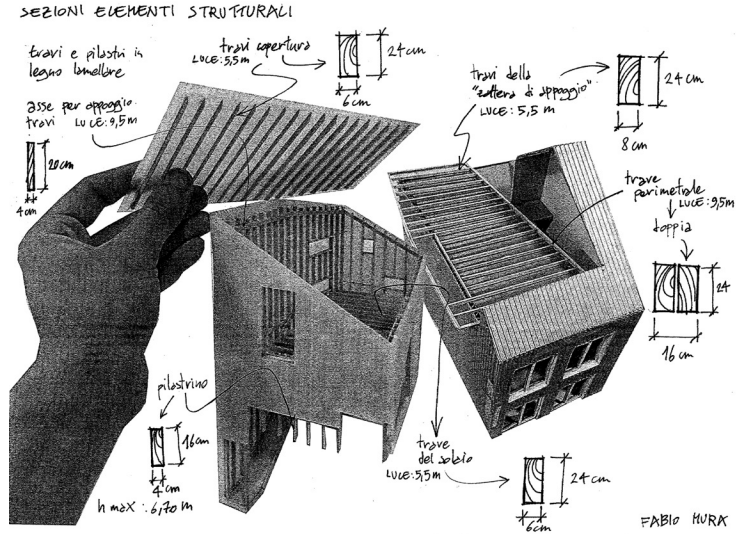
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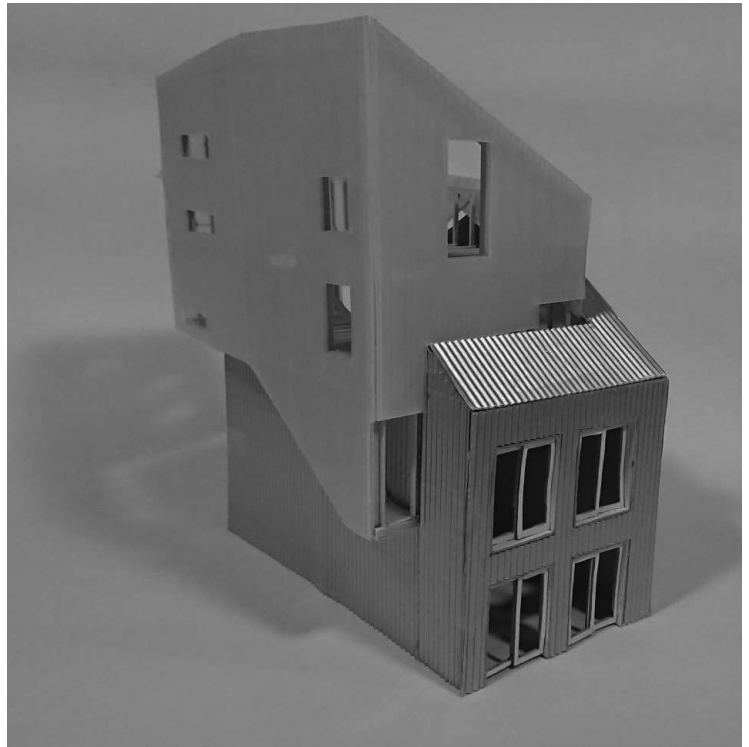
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