The Great Game: defining architectural design as collective practice.

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Architects appear torn between pursuing an irreducible specificity of their profession and the need to constantly negotiate that specificity with a variety of other actors, from the politician to the technician to the citizens' association. Architectural design is a collective practice, but the model that is transmitted and reproduced in the design studio is often that of architects who follow their own unique, creative idea.

Students learn that design is about ideas, professionals know that ideas – even good ones – are to be negotiated, modified and legitimated through continuous and energy-intensive exchanges with the other agents that participate in the transformation of space.

Can this particular competence be taught, or should students just wait and learn it through trial and error, after graduating? Ackowledging the social and political complexity of the contemporary world, the pedagogical experiment of the Great Game tries to address the need to move from individual creativity to collective practice. Within a game of strategies, each group of practitioners has a different client, clients have a story, their intentions are not always clear, they don't know exactly what they want, they change their mind; norms and regulations are not always clear, they can be negotiated, they go undetected for a time; economic interests change, developers withdraw support, flashy narratives turn out to be more effective than well thought-out volume compositions.

The practitioners' primary objective is that of defining viable strategies and associating the right set of actors to carry them through, thus developing an understanding of design practice as collective practice, and of the mechanisms that make it possible to socialize ideas into the real world of political exchanges. The game has been tested in two successive academic years: this paper will trace its theoretical positioning, the way it has unfolded and its possibilities for application.