

Aalto University Architecture courses in low resource settings (1993 – 2009)

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The Faculty of Architecture at Helsinki University of Technology (today Aalto University) has given courses on development issues since 1993 when Juhani Pallasmaa became the Dean of the Faculty. I was basically given a free hand to build up this activity and asked Veikko Vasko to do it together with me. The approach of the first programme named *Interplay of Cultures* was to give an introduction to the general development problems of the majority of the world's people and communities. Since just at that very time my friend Anne Rosenlew had acquired a property in Senegal (familiar to me after three years there as a UNESCO employee) which she wanted to use for precisely these kind of purposes, annual field work was carried out there in 1994-97 with the aim of acquainting students specifically with an African context. Most projects were theoretical exercises, as has always been the general *raison d'être* of the course, but some of them led to realisations, most prominently the "Red House", the women's centre in Rufisque (by Saija Hollmén, Jenni Reuter, and Helena Sandman) which has been published in many of the world's foremost architectural magazines.

The course, *World Architecture and Planning*, started in the autumn of 2000 and adopted the theme of *City in Crisis*. The objective was to create an understanding of the dynamics of urbanisation and of global issues in urban policies through lectures, seminars and exercises. All around the world, cities and urban settlements with their uncontrolled growth, congestion, traffic and environmental problems constitute a major challenge to governments and local authorities. Yet, most economic activity also takes place in the cities.

For the first six years of this studio a two-week field work period in Benin for a group of 10-15 students of different disciplines and nationalities was organised. The objective was, as it had been in Senegal, to learn to understand the realities of life and conditions of professional work in a developing country of the South. The base during the field work was the Finnish cultural centre *Villa Karo* at Grand Popo.

The first field mission in 2001 documented and analyzed the town of Grand Popo and its built environment whereas, the following year, the fishing harbour and the working and living conditions of the fishermen and their families, was chosen as the main subject for study. Later field trips were devoted to the revitalization and urban renewal of the Old Gbekon, the dilapidated colonial commercial centre of Grand-Popo, as well as on the creation of a new civic centre or "heart" to serve the daily life of the inhabitants of Grand Popo, in search for identity and new sense of place.

The field work during 2004 – 2006 covered housing problems including the preparation of plans for an area in Nicoué-Kondji where a master plan for housing development had been made, but for which the local community desired alternatives. Urban design projects were prepared for the improvement of major traffic junction areas and alternatives for a centre for local women’s associations for their meetings and training activities were studied. One group of students studied tourism, one of the key sectors of development in Grand Popo with the aim of designing a hotel school with related small scale activities for the development of the tourist business. As an alternative to Grand Popo development projects students also studied the conditions of Togolese refugees in Benin at Agamé and produced general improvement ideas for refugee camps.

The projects of the previous year were always presented to the representatives of the local community during the following visit. The presentations were usually followed by lively discussions, and the reports were handed over to the municipality for their free use.

It is important to emphasize that a university is primarily involved in teaching, not the implementation of development projects. However, if viable projects are identified, financing can be sought on the basis of proposals prepared through student work. The Mayor of Grand Popo, Mr Eugène Kpade saw this clearly. In his view our primary interests were: (i) enculturation of our students, (ii) the academic work of a university, and (iii) identification of projects. He pointed out that ideas presented in the student’s projects should be seen as an output which could be used and further developed by the local community; “We need dreams”.

After six years in Grand Popo and Benin, it was, however, felt that a change was called for. A total of ten years of going to Africa made us now look east. Helsinki University of Technology, and particularly its Water Laboratory, has had connections with projects in the Mekong delta for some years now. We also found out that one of the alumni of the *Interplay of Cultures* course, a participant in the very first field trip to Senegal, now ran a busy architectural practice in Phnom Penh. The historical treasures of Cambodia undeniably also played a part in the decision to consider Phnom Penh as the new venue for the studio. The first group of students would travel to Cambodia at the end of February 2008.

The timing of our trip was excellent. The School of Architecture of the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) was organising a workshop under the theme “Designing with people” together with the very active local non-governmental organisation STT (Sahmakum Teang Tnaut – Housing Rights Task Force) just as sixteen students from six different European countries arrived in town with their two teachers. Half of the students took active part in the workshop while the rest were looked after by another prominent NGO, the UPDF (Urban Poor Development Fund). Everyone came together for the final day of the workshop where the work of the mixed student groups was presented.

Thus, after the first few days of their stay, the students were already well versed with issues such as eviction threats, informal settlements, marginalised communities, land sharing, serviced-site schemes, relocations and upgrading. All had personally visited examples of sites where the population was living under continuous threat of eviction, as well as relocation sites of all possible categories.

The work continued efficiently, largely because of the continuing involvement and help of the staff of the two NGOs, STT and UPDF (Urban Poor Development Fund), and also because of the relentless work of our other collaborators, which made it possible for us to have discussions with such relevant and diverse personalities as the Vice Governor of Phnom Penh (with the unenviable job of being in charge in charge of planning, development and poverty alleviation) and the designers in charge of some of the major private sector development projects.

The second field trip to Cambodia in 2009, just as the previous one, started with a visit to the temples of Angkor. In addition we cruised on the Tonlé Sap, visited the floating village of Chong Kneas and the flooded forests around the wonderful village of Kompong Phhluk. Once in Phnom Penh, Khmer Architecture Tours provided us with a great opportunity to get to know the historical sights of Phnom Penh itself, and particularly the work of Vann Molyvann and other pioneers of the golden era of modern Khmer architecture of the 1950s and 1960s.

Again in 2009, RUFA and STT responded to our call with another workshop, now concentrating on housing rights and largely focusing on the theme "Save the Lake". The project based on filling in Boeung Kak Lake in the centre of Phnom Penh has become a symbol for many large speculative ventures financed by investors from abroad. These provide an excellent forum for continuous discussion and scope for a multitude of alternative projects which perhaps can address the problems in a manner that is fairer to the ordinary man of the street. The conflict between the need for continuous economic growth and increased competitiveness on the one hand, and the basic needs of the less privileged on the other, is of course not peculiar to Phnom Penh. The relative accessibility of the authorities in charge, together with the exceptionally active NGOs, made it, however, at that moment, an ideal venue to study these phenomena which lie in the very centre of the *raison d'être* of our studio course.

When a field trip forms an essential part of the approach and structure of a course like ours, it is, if desired results are to be achieved, necessary to spend the time during the trip learning, observing the local realities, and collecting information. Meanwhile the subjects will be defined and gradually formulated into realistic projects. The actual design work that results in finalised plans and reports is performed in Finland after the field trip and eventually presented, exhibited and published at the Department of Architecture at the end of the spring term, usually around mid-May.