

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Architects are understood as being responsible for the construction of buildings and artefacts, as well as for different modifications and interventions that define our spatial environments. They have a clear influence on our relationships through the constructions they propose, but sometimes they use a formal approach which marginalises the meanings inherent in places. This results from a failure to consider in-depth analyses of the social nature of existing spaces that are inseparable from their technical, constructive, typological, or general architectural characteristics.

On the other hand, educational systems are generally responsible of producing the social changes deemed necessary for the future. However, in the case of architectural studies, schools can become intentional agents of cultural discontinuity, a type of discontinuity that neither reinforces traditional values nor recruits young people to become part of the existing system (Batallán, Campanini, 2008). Rather, they recruit students for a system that does not yet exist, or is still emerging. Inevitably, this produces conflicts, since sometimes the knowledge conveyed in schools of architecture isolates their future architects from the cultural system they intend to serve. 'Architect houses' is a popular expression, which means housing that follows aesthetic ideas and mantras far different from the cognitive models of mainstream society, that is to say, from the spaces in which a large part of the population has been socialised. One needs to take into account not only the direct client, in other words he who orders the work, but also all those who, in one way or another, will be affected by the scenery of social life, even if only through the facades of the buildings. It is also necessary to bear in mind that environments materialise values, as well as help to develop resilience in the face of special and extreme situations. They help to maintain and support daily activities otherwise eroded by catastrophe, and allow losses of all kinds to be overcome more quickly.

Therefore, it is essential to implement strategies based on the importance of the relationship of space and people as a mediating agency between the physical form of their communities and their ever-changing culture (Arkaraprasertkul, 2009).

The use of participative methods is an important tool for design, since it is possible to think further and create project modes that actively integrate all of the actors and stakeholders involved. This is based on the understanding that knowledge is always polyhedral and enhanced by the confluence of different perspectives that strengthen joint action as a community. This requires architects to be interested and willing to ask questions concerning the rationale behind certain activities that take place in

*opposite page*  
**European Heritage Training Course "Architectural documentation of traditional wooden architecture" at Kozichkovi Houses in Kotel, Bulgaria**

*(credits: European Heritage Volunteers)*



**Participatory workshop with the inhabitants of Piazza Valdelsa, within the project *Parole in Piazza* by Sale Grosso and Avventura Urbana (2023). Florence, Italy**

*(credits: Sander Marra)*



the community, rather than to just think about the characteristics of the architecture and the physical conditions. Only by developing an awareness of multiple existing dynamics, can they avoid becoming agents of discontinuity. This type of engagement enables a consideration of the different perspectives present in architectural spaces, and provides a broader view of reality (Nyumba et al., 2018). It also implies a re-evaluation of practices, norms and management styles which might otherwise be taken for granted, or applied without critical evaluation.

This highlights why it is important for architects to undertake participative engagement with communities, as a way of developing an understanding of the microcosm in which they work. This is relevant, because it will assist architects in finding strategies that will help them capture the various issues they must attend to, which pivot from the most specific issues related to the direct orders of their private clients, to those other variables that are related to the community where the project will be located. It should not be forgotten that individual processes do not cease to be social since they always start from a social reference (Stewart et al., 2013).

At the same time, incorporating these strategies enables knowledge and allows it to increase, and also generates opportunities for post-occupancy evaluation, permitting architects to learn steadily from each project they have designed. Therefore, architects improve their knowledge concerning the importance of the built environment, its spaces and physical forms, in order to better understand the behaviour of its inhabitants (Suri, 2011). Furthermore, developing the awareness that the learning process must address and deal with issues of a formalistic and symbolic nature is a necessary step towards ascribing meaning to architecture.

It is paramount to bear in mind that architecture provides conditions for being human and responds to the human condition. There is a need to rethink the philosophy underlying the material manifestations that, roughly, are induced in projects from the community, considering that the architects in



**European Heritage Volunteers Project Conservation works at a fortified church complex at the ensemble of the fortified church in Hosman, Romania**

(Credits: European Heritage Volunteers)

charge of shaping their homes must be agents attached to their worldview. If not, they could be viewed with suspicion (Pallasmaa, 2012).

Equally, it is important to explore the architectural conditions that support and are part of socio-cultural structures. Architecture has been, since ancient times, a tool in the hands of power, using buildings to display a capacity for influence over others. At the same time, the teaching of architecture has in some ways participated in this dynamic, by limiting and restricting knowledge to one type of architecture over another. This has resulted in the implementation of homogenising processes that, in late-modernity, have brought about the uniforming of constructions within territories, thus causing the progressive modification of traditional landscapes based on the specific collective cognitive models. To counter this, it is imperative that community engagement strategies are incorporated into the design process.

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