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Thinking, Doing, Writing, Researching – The Brussels experiments in forms and processes of knowledge

Having known each other for some years from various academic co-operation ventures in the Scandinavian academic milieu, we were very pleased to have been both invited to chair Session 2 “Forms and Processes of Knowledge”. We found it very useful to be given the opportunity to work as a team and, thus, being able to discuss the idea, content and assumed ways of execution of that academic task. The pedagogical challenge seemed to be rather substantial as we previously did not meet that group of architects to be our “students” and who, we believed, would have a different professional background than the postgraduates architects we usually work with in Scandinavia.

While planning a curriculum, even one as short as that of Session 2, we had in mind the objective of the teaching, and the assumed character of the students. We surmised that our contribution to this part of the four sessions should be in presenting a broader perspective of various knowledge types and to help the students to position their ongoing work, being it as a practicing architect or a teacher of architecture, in such a “landscape of knowledges”. Further on, we believed that, in spite of the short time we had for our course, we should attempt to prepare the students for “informed” discussions on how their ongoing work with their various knowledge aspects, could be regarded as “researchable” and even as a point of departure for an eventual doctoral project.

Not knowing the professional and academic background of our students we decided that we should provide for a common academic platform for the session. This objective we hoped could be achieved by asking the students to read a few introductory texts and to prepare a small written assignment, both prior to the session. The selection of the texts was a subject to our discussions both with regard to the kind of the literature and to the volume of the reading. The planned session as a whole involved reading (in the pre-start assignment), discussion (especially in the start-up session and in plenum discussion), listening (during lectures), writing (in the pre-start assignment and positioning of potential research), but we felt that we could need working also in media closer to design as well.

A week before the start of the session a hectic e-mail exchange found place between, on the one hand, the Sint-Lucas’ sessions staff, and both of us, on the other. It seemed that our suggestions with regard to these reading and writing assignments were not well received on the part of our prospective students and we considered if we should, on these uncertain grounds, go to Brussels. It almost tempted us not to do so in the light of these “dramatic” e-mail exchanges. This hesitation had another, more trivial, reason that we were to be missing part of our Easter Holiday (which in Scandinavia begins at the academic institutions just before the Palm Sunday and lasts to the end of the Easter Holiday and which just coincided with the dates of the session). But in the end we decided to give the venture a try.

We arrived in Brussels still surprised by the strong reactions on the part of our prospective students. Under a hasty discussion we expressed to each other our uncertainty about what this session would be like. How could we discuss the theme of “forms and processes of knowledge” without any prior reading, any texts and common concepts? What were the reasons to the reactions? Had we presented irrelevant texts? Was it just some practitioners’ unwillingness to read, some scepticism like “what can I actually do with a text”? Was it based in a conception that “research by design” exclusively is about research by doing, testing and experimenting, not reading and writing? A little anxious to meet a rather sceptical and hostile group, we became more confident about the possibilities for a fruitful session, nevertheless, after the first meeting with the group of our students. We found out during that meeting that the main reason of the earlier problems was due to the lack of time for the preparations.

But we assessed immediately that the situation needed a change of our pedagogical strategy, that we should use a little bit more of our abilities as trained architects and a more designerly approach to the session itself by “re-designing” the design of the session while practicing and doing it. We had to be responsive, adapt to the situation and the changing reactions from the involved actors, act quickly and be direct. Some parts of the session had to be more clear, practical and directly in contact with material close to the participants’ daily architectural and pedagogical work, which could open for using and testing different forms and “tools” of expression.

We replaced the previously proposed field work with a more limited assignment asking the participants to individually formulate in a written form – a more traditional “Positioning of potential research project” by answering the questions Why?, What? and How?. We also decided to introduce a pedagogical experiment that Halina had used in a different pedagogical context just a few days before. Calling this part of the session “Between the argumentative and the associative thinking” the participants were requested to draw or paint an image of their proposed research project or of aspects of it on a poster. They were also told to prepare and formulate questions to the fellow participants which should provide a better understanding of the contents of the posters submitted. The students were asked to work two and two in order to be more actively involved in discussion on the matters at hand.

This part of the session was a jeopardy that could easily turn out to fall totally flat, be a fiasco, a banal kindergarten exercise if not taken seriously. But we were astonished by the participants’ skills to formulate, communicate and discuss very interesting and complicated issues visually. Trained to grasp and visually present complex matters and relations by images, and then seriously interpret, formulate questions about and discuss each other’s work, the participants surely showed and made again clear in different ways to us the potential of consciously using design thinking, design knowledge and skills in research. Their ideas, expressed in both written and visual form made together a very rich and inspiring set of research proposals. They were formulated as a multi-faceted, but surprisingly coherent field of problems – a field formulated with help from and to be researched by design thinking.

The initial reactions to our initial course curriculum had forced us to act and think differently than we had assumed was “right” at the time, to formulate the tasks in other ways in a more direct contact with the situation. At the moment of the confrontation we experienced the situation as quite perplex, but seen today we think it turned out for the best. With all these different pedagogical “tools” applied and all these various skills developed, together with the diverse fields of knowledge brought in by the participants, the session in itself became an experiment and a transdisciplinary work. (See Gibbons et al., 1994) Thanks to the participants’ abilities to serious thinking and doing, this experiment gave valuable insights, inspiration and knowledge to us tutors, as well as, hopefully, to some of the participants. During the session one can say that we saw glimpses of “new, original and communicable knowledge” formulated in writing and images, that the different documents produced were a start of a “route mapping”, and the participants worked in a “continuum from scientific research to creative practice”, everybody being thus already on his/her way of developing a “doctorateness” as formulated by Frayling. (Frayling, 2001)

Texts were used in the different parts of the students’ assignments, but not only as a means to analyse, scrutinise or deconstruct things, but to actually construct thoughts and concepts to be used. The text is a tool among other tools in the repertoire of the designer – and one can agree with Deleuze that the most interesting is to see what a concept or text can do or how it can be used in an “extra-textual practice”. (Deleuze, 1997)

To practically do things, test different forms of working, formulate one’s ideas in different media and give form to thoughts in different materials obviously turned out to be fruitful and important. It was clear that knowledge is about form – about giving form, in verbal utterances, discursive texts, visual images or material assemblages – as formulated by Foucault and later Deleuze. (Foucault, 1972; Deleuze, 1990) At the same time one has to be clear about what skills, trained abilities and knowledge that are used, but not being afraid of letting them meet, mixing them, using them in different contexts. The most exciting about practical experiments is the unexpected, surprising outcome – not the anticipated results. But to get there one has to take risks. Then one really can start interesting processes leading to new formulations and forms of knowledge.

Of course no “perfectly” clear and completely full-designed research proposals or questions were formulated during this short session, but most of the proposed projects surely had very interesting potential and all could make starting points for further work. A field of research was delineated by the group that hopefully will be explored and formulated by the participants in discussions and in writing, reading and designing – by using product, interior, landscape, urban and architectural design. And in experiments creatively mixing them.

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