

Education and architecture. Young people's perspectives and dialogues for a better understanding of built environment.

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to understand young people's prospects on the the spaces they inhabit and how these spaces affect their ways of living, through a qualitative ethnographic case study. An incorporation of knowledge from the disciplines of Architecture and Education is proposed, combining their relevance methodological, epistemological and social strategies in order to provide socio-educative strategies around and from architecture.

The ethnographic research is taking place in a school in Oporto's city center, with students from the 3rd cycle of basic education (7th to 9th grade, between approximately 12 and 15 years old) different research techniques are being used – participant-observation, semi-directive interviews and focus group discussion. The objective of this research is to understand the perceptions of young people about the built environment and how can they relate to it. Subsequently, through these perspectives, a global vision of architecture will be discussed and questioned, as well as, its social, economic and political potentials, considering young people as social actors and authors, clarifying how can they have an active role in improving building environment, using architecture as tool for citizen education.

In this article we present a preliminary analysis of focus group discussions that give us some clues for further research development. In this intermediate stage of research we can point to the existence of a direct relationship between the level of power over a given space and the satisfaction level, that is, the more young people appropriate spaces, the more they identify with them.

CONFERENCE THEME: "Integrating the human dimension in architectural research"

KEY WORDS: Architecture, society, education, citizenship, empowerment

"In a conversation with young people:

Researcher (R) - What do you think architecture is?

Participant 1 (P1) - The shape of everything, of how to build things.

(R) – What is it for?

(P1) - To build whatever we want.

(R) - And where does it exist?

(P1) - In all that surrounds us.

(R) – Would you like to learn more about architecture?

(P1) - Yes, to learn more about what surrounds us (...).

(R) - Why do you think architecture is important?

Participant 2 - To do the right things and in practical ways, do things with the exact measurements (...)"

In this small dialogue we can understand how conversations with young people are revealing; we see through this speech, a disarmingly objectivity thinking pattern. It is from them and from their speech that we intend to conduct our research, strengthening the communication between architecture and society and integrating the human dimension in architectural research.

The interest for subject arises from the architectural practice. The main author of this research, as an architect, finds some difficulties in communicating in different contexts and with different people about her work and its advantage to the quality of construction. This communication problem arises because of how architects' spatial conceptions are in part, distinct from the users' in that basic concerns are not focused on what is essential to architecture as a generator of stimulating spaces, that promote comfort [physical, emotional, social, thermal, mental.]. We think that a better perception of space in a user's perspective is essential to understanding the architectural social role and the kind

of dialogues that can be promoted for greater and mutual understanding. Our research with young people adopts the perspective that they are not only citizens “to be” but they already have knowledge and skills that allow them to be active and autonomous citizens. (Corsaro, 2005).

The need for this research also emerges from the current context of architecture in Portugal, within the diverse social economic, political and cultural perspectives, architecture, as multidisciplinary knowledge, provides dialogue among different disciplines. This relationship can be established in different ways, so we are interested in characterizing these dialogues and clarifying in which sense they are related to our issues. The “problem” is not specific to architecture, but across all these fields of knowledge and it is in this context that we intend to circumscribe the field of study of our research, establishing a bridge between architecture and education.

We start with an identified social problem: architecture is not understood by people in general as a vehicle for quality of life improvement in Portugal. There does not seem to exist an effective educational policy for citizens’ involvement in the built environment and their participation is scarce. Moreover, dialogue between architectural world and society has led, on one hand, to a weak understanding of “architectural culture”, and on the other hand, to a certain blindness or autism in relation to social experiences. **This dichotomy between architecture and society may be related to the fact that the “architectural world” is thought, to some extent, outside social reality and everyday existence, not being originated from the users but hypothetically constructing for them.**

The problem here identified can be translated in others: a low rate of participated architecture; a small involvement of citizens in built environment and territory, limited request of architectural work; a weak relationship between architecture and society, and incompatible languages between them. Part of these problems have origin in architects’ professional identity and status in that “weak readability of Architecture (poor rapport with the other disciplines) and the tendency for self-isolation; the instability of the different modes of exercise (i.e., the lack of formalization of roles and social responsibilities of the architect) (...)” (Brandão, 2006b: 218) are among the factors determining this crisis.

If we consider that “in the architect’s field the differentiation of the ways and levels of understanding and practicing the discipline itself is increasingly clearer, interdisciplinary is much more compelling as solutions to problems that arise appear less obvious at the starting point. Interdisciplinary is a response not only to the technical complexity but rather a requirement for making objectives of multiple levels (sometimes contradictory) compatible, and respond to the uncertainty that surrounds us” (Portas, 2006:12).

Thus, this study seeks to articulate architecture with the education in order to establish a new dialogue through interdisciplinary. For architecture it is important to work through the issues of architectural space through the user, and how he sees and appropriates the spaces, adapting and adjusting the design to the needs of the inhabitants.

For education it will be important to work personal and social relationships from the physical space, understanding how the built environment influences the way we learn and grasp the world around us. We will discuss the issues of power and ownership, the sense of belonging and identification with the spaces we inhabit, to better integrate the human dimension in architecture. We believe that knowledge sharing; resource optimization and discussion of the results may stimulate the mutual enrichment of both knowledges, promoting social and educational strategies around and from architecture, allowing the empowerment of citizens.

For architecture the space is the result, building is to create and conform new spaces. These spaces may have different physical characteristics, being tall, short, wide, narrow, bright, articulate, functional, modelers, etc., or may be predominantly social characteristics: sensory, neutral, inhabited, public, private, hierarchical, appropriate, modeled, organized, educational, isolated, insulated, etc... In both situations it is the human being who has the perception of these spaces and gives them certain characteristics, identities and subjectivities. “The body is connected to a place for a direct link, a contact, which is but one way among others to relate into the world.” (Bourdieu, 1998a: 120). Architecture works with the physical dimension but also with the social dimension, thinking the space

as a whole, space of living, being, interacting, memory, culture, learning, time, body, relationships, communication, identities, life experiences, and interactions.

These space readings are what we want to know and to understand; which are the spatial subjectivities of young people and what are the relationships they establish with certain areas. "Subjectivity refers to "the space of representation itself, but also the place where the individual is aware that there are representations and, therefore, is distanced from the world (Martuccelli, 2002: 442)" (Silva, 2008 : 22). The relationship between the subject and the space where he belongs has different influences, which confer a certain subjectivity. The space is built by humans, but it is also the space that conditions and models, there is an ongoing relationship that gives us our space identity. The interpretation that each individual makes is directly related to the spaces they inhabit, but also with their standpoints (Harding, 2004). The question of pertaining to a place is inseparable from the question of identity and how they are subjectively defined by showing how groups and individuals relate to the area, seizing it and also being defined by it (Silva, 2008). It is in the physical space that the real and symbolical distinctions of social space are expressed (Bourdieu, 1998a; Lopes, 1997).

According to Foucault (1988), spaces have certain characteristics that affect us, this is the question of body disciplining in terms of the space we inhabit, in the sense that it affects us and normalizes our actions. But in which way young people feel these constraints today? What kind of relationship do they have with space and until where goes their freedom to use it? These and other issues relate spaces with subjects' actions in specific places that we would like to see decoded in order to better understand the inherent subjectivity.

The architecture of schools is definitely the privileged space where we work on "Education in Architecture". The spaces are designed to teach, ranking the different levels of concentration and study. In addition to focusing on the main school space, the classroom, the space of formal education par excellence, it is important to understand how the school functions as a whole and how the remaining spaces are also educational. The school program has been monitoring educational needs. At the moment, school is not only the classrooms and access corridors but a multiplicity of spaces suitable for different school experiences.

On the other hand, we think the theme of education in architecture in a broader perspective in order to understand the genesis of space around us and how it influences our daily life, stressing the importance of built space in the development of our relational skills.

The choice of a school to achieve this ethnographic study relates to the fact that is a specific context where young people spend most of their days. School is the main environment where young people socialize, where they spend the time required for the classes and also some of their leisure time. From this context, where we can find children and young people, we can have privileged access to interactions and behaviors that would not exist in other places. School is not a simple building but it is composed of different types of spaces with un equal, and not always obvious, levels of privacy, which allow different types of readings, appropriations and occupations.

To choose the school in which to conduct the investigation we took into account five main factors: a school included in "*Parque escolar*" program, located in the city of Oporto ,with Primary and Secondary education, and easy person contact and access .

The school in which we are conducting this qualitative research is the Primary and Secondary School Rodrigues de Freitas, a school in Oporto's city centre, located in the urban area and close to the historic center. The fact that it is between two distinct areas of the city, among the oldest area [Cedofeita] and the most modern [Boavista] leads to greater cultural diversity. The original project of the school is from the architect Marques da Silva, built between 1927 and 1933, the year that it was inaugurated, although there were still construction works until 1939. Between 1956 and 1958, the building underwent an expansion and renovation project by the architect Fernandes de Sá. Recently, the school has been part of the project for modernization of schools "Parque Escolar" as a pilot school - project by the architect Manuel Fernandes de Sá – and it was completed in 2008.

This framework allows us to understand a part of the socio-historical context of this building: from the former school for boys to the Rodrigues de Freitas of today, how the structure and the architecture remain and the spaces are reinvented, and the readings that its users do of the "before" and "after".

This renovated building also has the particularity of reconciling two schools in the same building: the Rodrigues de Freitas school and the music conservatory of Oporto which share some infrastructures but whose privileges are not completely comparable because the students of the conservatory are allowed in the spaces of Rodrigues de Freitas but the reverse is prohibited.

Schools are places where the formal participation of young people in the organization of space is not significant. However, they often subvert the spaces as their own and appropriate them. Our goal, in addition to finding out what they think about the spaces and working these issues with them, is to understand how, in their own way, they participate in the organization of space even if this mode of participation is not recognized. We intend to give visibility to these forms of involvement and participation that are perceived as smaller, less worthy, and in some cases, even deviant. It will be essential to pay attention to their speech and behavior. We will assume responsibility for listening to and understanding their relationship with space, the city school, and also to hear their proposals. By understanding their practical reasoning we can better understand what is meaningful to them in their relations with the spaces and this is a way to be able to think about more refined strategies on how to promote such a dialogue between architecture, education and citizenship.

In our investigation, education will be the mean by which the architecture will be worked on and explored. We will begin by exploring young people's knowledge about the spaces and architecture that surround them, trying to understand their spatial perceptions, how they relate to space and how it is appropriated. From this awareness we will develop a critical-constructive perspective in order for them to be able to suggest improvements and new ways of appropriating space, always from the user's perspective.

This will be a qualitative investigation in which we do not go into the field with previously formulated hypotheses. We have, however, an observation field within certain limits in which young people interact, and where we seek to understand how they relate to the school and what kind of experiences emerge.

In qualitative research, researchers "(...) tend to analyze their data inductively. They do not collect data or evidence in order to confirm or refute hypotheses constructed previously, rather, abstractions are built as the data individuals that were collected will be gathering." (Bogdan, Biklen 1994:50). This process is unclear, the observed fact leads us to another and so on, it is around this story that we build our arguments, but without ever moving away from our empirical object.

Although this methodology is common in education, it is not widely used in Architectural research. However, as our research evolves, we find a great empathy between architecture and qualitative investigation, especially as in this case we are interested in knowing how young people relate to space/architecture and which are their interpretations and understandings. The ethnographic method integrated with a qualitative research allows us to have a perspective of built space from its actors and authors, trying to see with their eyes the reality that surrounds them. This methodology allows architecture to be directly in the hands of who enjoys it more directly, and will use and appropriate spaces, and also who will give them meaning and identity. It is an opportunity to look at the architecture project beyond the construction stage, and beyond the so-called late stage, which is actually the beginning of another phase that is not less important, the habitation of space as the scene of action, scenes and experiences which confer it meaning. This step is where we can really evaluate the architecture and see if it corresponds to the tasks that were initially set, listening to those who inhabit the space and relate to it. Moreover, it is through this assessment that architecture can reflect on its design process and challenge new forms, new spaces, new construction, combining the knowledge of the architect with the experience of the user.

Following these assumptions and guidelines, our investigation will use various research techniques: participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. "(...) Here, again, we are focused on research strategies that allow the researcher to grasp the social world at first hand." (Burgess, 1997:3). This diversification of research methods allows us to absorb different perspectives within the same context. This theme of "multiple strategies", "(...) allows the investigator to use a certain variety of methods, data, research and theories in the context of any study, thereby overcoming problems such as bias. However, when using this term we have another purpose: not

only to see different approaches used simultaneously, but to see them integrated in ongoing research (see Zelditch 1962, Sieber, 1973). "(Burgess, 1997:160).

The chosen methodology will be an ethnographic case study. What is ethnography for us? Most important, it is a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms the irreducibility of human experience. Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events. (Willis, Trondman, 2000:394)

According to the Manifesto for Ethnography *An interest in cultural policy and cultural politics*. We must explore the role of critical ethnography in developing conscious and evocative policy forms that help to make explicit embedded logics, so that social actors become more agents of their own will but within some sociological frame, somehow understood, conditioning and setting its limits of possibility—changing the social within the social (Willis, Trondman, 2000)

Through the ethnographic method we can meet the cultural and social practices that are visible in everyday life, without changing them, we can understand the views of social actors and fit them in their context.

Initially, through participant observation we will notice how young people relate to space, how they appropriate it. Hence, we intend to perceive the meanings assigned to each of the spaces and to what extent they represent synonyms of individual and social identities. In the second phase we will work specifically with young people in the 3rd cycle (from 12 to 15 years old), performing Focused Discussion Groups, trying to listen to them and identify the types of readings that they have of spaces, as well as asking them about the kind of power they feel they have in the areas they inhabit. This discussion is important, not only to motivate them to act but also to question them and make them feel responsible for preserving the spaces that surround them. They can understand how architecture can be a vehicle for the improvement of living conditions and through which they can their spatial needs.

Given that the school where we are conducting our research is included in the "Parque Escolar" program and was recently renewed, we will perform some semi-directive interviews so as to understand the perspectives of different actors of the school environment on architecture and design. From this data platform, we will then launch new guidelines for the development of our research. The interviews work as a complement to the research process and participants will include the project architect, mentor, and at least one teacher, one student and one employee who were in school before, during and after the works performed. With this kind of approach we aim to understand the meanings and interpretations that users have of the spaces they inhabit and also realize the architect's sensitivity and experience regarding this process.

In interviewing the architect responsible for the renovation of the school we can counteract his expectations of the project with the type of ownership and readings from young people who inhabit it, thus providing a double reflection of the architectural object, i.e., performing the Post Occupancy evaluation which included the impact of the built environment on its inhabitants.

At the end of this investigation we hope to be able to understand to what extent the space we live in influences our way of being and relating with each other, thereby having a complete picture about the importance of integrating the human dimension in architectural design. We seek to reconcile the prospect of citizens with the architects in order to stimulate synergies in both directions and provide greater dialogue, cooperation and involvement. Based on existing work with young people, particularly during participant observation and focused discussion groups, we will now present some thoughts and conclusions that we reached, particularly with regard to youth perspectives on school spaces and their sense of ownership and power of those spaces. Field notes are the most significant part of our empirical material and correspond to the ethnographic work, where we note the field work and data collected. It is from them that we will perform content analysis and research base, thus the quality of field notes affects the entire investigation. Content analysis corresponds to the data collected during the ethnographic research, field notes, in this case on participant observation and focused discussion groups. This type of analysis is concerned primarily with the text content and its empirical conditions.

While performing content analysis on the data, we will classify the descriptive data collected according to the issues and concerns raised by the investigation. After a first analysis of data collected during participant observation, we drafted the scripts for the focused discussion groups. Despite not being specific categories of analysis, we identified different areas of development work. Starting from a global sphere to the personal scale the identified areas are:

- The School - Rodrigues de Freitas,
- The common areas of the school,
- The classrooms and corridors
- “Our” spaces
- The school and conservatory - socio-spatial relations
- Sense of ownership / change of space
- The school and the city
- From home to school
- House
- My spaces
- Dream spaces

Across these themes we always worked to identify young people’s dimensions and the personal relationships that are always inherent.

In this article we present some of the findings, mainly related to the first five identified topics.

When questioned about the spaces that they like best at school, young people give preference, in general, to recreation and leisure at the expense of spaces for formal education, the classrooms. Even in the distinction between classrooms, they prefer some over others, not because they are spatially different, but mainly because of the type of subjects and activities that are developed there. Thus, they associate the degree of satisfaction with the space with the activity that is developed there and the experiences that they have in this particular space.

Regarding outdoor spaces there are also unanimous opinions: the playing fields and outdoor recreational areas are preferred. When referring the outdoor spaces associated with the conservatory to which students of Rodrigues de Freitas do not have access, initially they say they do not like it, but when we try to understand why they do not like it, their answers are evasive and not specific enough. We infer, from their speech, that they dislike the spaces not for their conformation but because they are out of bounds. Eventually, they confess that they have already been in those spaces, and used them occasionally, but their stay was forbidden, hence the main reason for disliking them.

Although there is no physical separation between Rodrigues de Freitas School and outer spaces of the Conservatory, the youngsters know exactly how far they can go and can clearly define the borders, thus contradicting the physical space to social space. When we refer the relationship between buildings and their separations, they become physical and are clearly identified. However, there is still the possibility of some visual communication because the doors, even though locked, are in glass and allow viewing of both spaces. This relationship between the two schools is interesting because although the physical spaces are similar, the way of being in them and the sense of ownership is very different. Conservatory students usually occupy the living space, with chairs and tables they can use to work in groups and study. Rodrigues students do not have furniture and only have transit areas, where they are just talking or standing while waiting for the bell to ring.

Another important factor that helps us understand how young people occupy school space has to do with the degree of freedom and privacy they have in each of the spaces. The more the space is hidden; hence less guarded, the more they privacy. They talk about these areas in an emotional way, giving them names that only they can identify, like they were secret spaces that are accessible but do not have permanent circulation. Another fact that must be taken into account is that in this school there is a large difference in the ages of the oldest (18/20 years) to the youngest (10 years). Depending on the ages and hobbies, young people occupy certain spaces over others. For example, 8th grade students (13/14 years old) speak of the entry space as if they did not like it – it is just for passing through. They

associate it to the fact that it is by the entry that you come to school, and because they do not like school, they do not like the entry. This space is typically used by older students that, being prohibited to smoke at school, are concentrated at the entrance outside. When asked if they really do not like school, they say that they do not like to come but after being there they like it.

In this intermediate stage of research we can point to the existence of a direct relationship between the level of power over a given space and the degree of satisfaction with that area, that is, the more young people feel the spaces as theirs, the more they can appropriate it, the more they like it because they identify it with themselves.

These living spaces can be individual but also social, as Marc Augé mentions, “the spatial device simultaneously expresses the identity of the group (the group’s origins are often different, but it is the identity of the place that establishes, gathers and unites it)” (Augé, 2005:41). It is in certain areas that relationships happen, where we meet, cross and live. In a second phase of the investigation we will attempt to understand how these spaces affect the way of being, as well as what kind of alterations and changes young people want to see in the spaces in order to increase their enjoyment in inhabiting them.

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