

SEARCHING FOR DISSIDENCE IN THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COSTA RICA: PERFORMATIVE ARTS AND ARCHITECTURE'S BOUNDARIES

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Introduction

This paper examines the pedagogical opportunities that arose after students executed a series of performative events at the School of Architecture or *Escuela de Arquitectura* (EA by its name in Spanish) at the University of Costa Rica (UCR). These performative events occurred in October of 2019. The “October events” allowed for a group of students to begin an ongoing exploration¹ of the potential of performance and of the value of intersecting spatial or architectural knowledge with performative practices. Students voices² claimed that the EA had turned its back to performative and more theoretical explorations, focusing mainly on building and technical aspects. Performance, specifically what I will refer to as “spatial performances” – performative events where architecture

¹ In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemics these efforts were suspended.

² For this work, conversations were held with students who were interested and participated in the actions taken including: Juan Leiva, Daniela Araya, Jeremy Salazar, Julio Matamoros, Esteban Barrantes, Zetty Alonso, Maximilano Morales. Some of this advanced students – Araya, and Barrantes – along with others not cited are working on a collective dissertation under the author's tutoring which tackles, precisely, the notion of experimenting as a means to address fixed or institutionalised ideas regarding spatial design in the Costa Rican current political, social and environmental context. Their voices should be only considered as partial opinions of the events that have become the interest of this essay. They provide a partial account of the recent events and serve to initiate a theoretical reflection on the possibilities of the performative in architectural education, which is precisely the intention of this essay.

knowledge is essential –, seemed to have served to expose topics of concern within the students body, complementing traditional methods of communication such as forums, letters and talks.

In order to offer context, the essay offers a brief history of the EA's foundation and early years as well as a short account of the socio-political events that allowed for these spatial performances to occur. From that point on, the text focuses on raising questions regarding the possible intersections between performative practices and the spatial knowledges commonly associated with training in architecture. As a theoretical framework, the essay will establish references to other experiences in teaching architecture and arts.

Notions of Dissidence

As Ines Weizman asserts architecture often has difficulties articulating a dissident position. Specifically Weizman affirms that:

Architecture is perhaps the least likely of practices to articulate a dissident position. Producing buildings requires political powers that control the two main conditions necessary for construction to occur – land and money. These are largely conservative and institutional. But the position of architecture – at the nexus where political, commercial, financial military, ideological, cultural forces operate – also has the potential to serve as the medium for articulating ideas of resistance, critique, reform or evasion. (Weizman, 2014, p.6)

At the same time, Architecture schools occupy a fundamental role, as Weizman establishes, in the articulation of such ideas. Since schools are partially free from the inherent pressures of building and market economies, they can observe building practices and explore associated phenomena from different positions, with the ability to shift, transform, ask questions and cross disciplinary boundaries while doing so. Weizman affirms “schools have, in particular areas and situations in both east and west, become the sites of dissident politics,

providing alternative sites of free thinking, imagination and political dissent *through* architecture” (Weizman, 2014, p.6).

Despite the opportunities that an academic context offers to reflect upon the discipline’s condition, consistent efforts require systematic use of theories and thinking methods. Given its geopolitical situation, the EA has had a tendency to focus on land planning and urban problems, social dwelling as well as in the development, within design studios, of institutional typologies. Design exercises are sometimes understood as solutions to specific realities or social needs. In this approach, experimentation and imagination – as means to analyse and defy constructed notions of reality – tend to occupy a more peripheral position. Scholarship suggests that this situation is partially related to the EA’s foundation. In the EA, where a progress narrative – in which aiding development occupied a central role – seems to have overpowered the EA’s foundational tradition on experimenting with intersections between architecture and the arts (Solano-Meza, 2017a). In the recent “October events”, spatial performances designed and executed by architecture students served, as means to question a perceived lack of experimentation, obsolete knowledge transfer practices, the role of architecture in national politics, and, more comprehensively, the future of the discipline in the country. The results of these spatial performances were timid but offered opportunities to question certain practices, thus becoming objects of interest.

A Brief History of the School of Architecture and its “experimental” performative tradition

The EA was founded in 1968 and begun operations in 1971 under an experimental programme. The programme had no specific subjects and all activities converged in the design studios. The course complemented techno-scientific knowledges with interests in freeing and exposing individual design processes. The first can be traced to the experience of the EA’s intellectual founders – Rafael “Felo” Garcia, Jorge Bertheau and Edgar Brenes – at the Department of Development

and Tropical Studies (DDTS) at the Architectural Association (AA) (Solano-Meza, 2017a). The second, the concern with the promotion of freedom and individual expression, also came, at least partially, from the three founders and other teachers such as Franz Beer, who were at the same time influenced by the work of Jon Chris Jones on design methods and creative thinking (Jones, 1992). During its first decade, the School was envisioned as a multidisciplinary hub, where tradition was to be constantly questioned through arts, science and architecture (García, 2013). Felo Garcia himself is known as one of Costa Rica's most important painters and considered by scholars as one of the plastic artists responsible for introducing abstract expressionism to Costa Rica in the 1960's (Zavaleta, 1994). He often used the EA's premises as his painting studio to allow students to participate in his creative process and in an attempt to blur boundaries between architecture and the arts³.

In fact, the intersections between techno-scientific knowledge – clearly shaped by the links with the DDTS – and individual free expression constituted one of the School's paradoxical and often conflicting foundational premises. Perhaps, this premise was only overpowered by the premise of aiding through architecture in the country's development, at a time when, as part of a political project, progress was rendered essential⁴ (Solano-Meza, 2017b). One of the original areas at the School used to address expression techniques (*Técnicas de Expresión* or TEX) as central part of creative processes. TEX were not limited to drawing or representation but sought to explore the connections between architecture, staging, drama and performative arts, in the tradition of the Bauhaus or the Valparaíso School in Chile. Experiments with cameras and filming were also constant as part of the School's explorations.

During the School's first years, architects and artists from South America, mainly from Chile and Argentina visited Costa Rica as invited lectures at the

³ These recollections are part of an ongoing set of interviews with staff members and first generations of the School. Interviews are being carried by the author and assisting undergraduate students.

⁴ Note that such notion of progress is constructed from Western perspectives of progress and development.



Figure 1. Students filming “Dos Puntos” a short film produced at the School, mid 1970’s. Courtesy of architect Rodolfo Granados. The film tells the story of a man and a woman running from opposite point in the capital city of San José to encounter

School, as many were subject of political persecution in their native countries, which were at the time under military rule: Fernán Meza, Germán Arestizábal and Juan Bernal Ponce, who opted to remain and teach in Costa Rica for the rest of his life, while the first two returned to South America. Meza and Arestizábal were interested in pushing limits regarding expression and movement. They deeply influenced the first generations of students. Bernal Ponce had a more traditional Beaux Arts approach to aesthetics and composition. As he remained in the EA for many years, its influence over aesthetic notions and composition is still tangible. Future studies should address his work and pedagogical inputs to the school.

If originally, there was an existing, and interesting, contradiction between experimentation, freedom and technical rigor, gradually the persecution of theoretical and performative experimentation as a means to produce knowledge has been overshadowed by concerns with aiding in the country’s development



Figure 2. Students filming “Dos Puntos” a short film produced at the School, mid 1970’s. Courtesy of architect Rodolfo Granados

through building, technology application – often associated with tropical climate – and what could be called an “approach to reality”. In other words, building techniques, knowledge of legal and institutional framework, technical data and urbanism principles seem to occupy a relevant position, while experimental architectures and theoretical approaches have remained peripheral to design practices⁵. Although reasons for this condition are complex and would require specific studies, a few causes can be pointed out: institutional pressure from the UCR for the School to structure its curricular programme, association to the Faculty of Engineering – paradoxically the School of Architecture is adjunct to this faculty – , the loss of teaching staff associated to arts and spatial performance, lost links with international institutions such as the AA and the

⁵ It is relevant to point out that this condition is not negative in itself but suggests an imbalance in the School’s programme.

DPU⁶, and an infamous auditing process – known as *La Intervención* – led by the UCR's Council from 1988 to 1989 which sought to end curricular and serious organisational issues within the EA, the transition from a comprehensive structure towards a subject by subject organisation and the division of the School's curriculum in areas: design, histories and theories and techno-science⁷. Perhaps, the main reason for the almost absolute abandonment of performative practices – or its dissolution in the midst of building oriented design exercises – was the lack of definition regarding concepts such as experimenting and innovating. The EA's first documents – its first programme and following dissertations and curricula – show a great interest in exploring, experimenting and in contesting boundaries imposed by a conservative society to creative professions such as architecture. The original staff considered defying tradition as an essential part of the EA's existence, given the Costa Rican context, at the time experiencing complex cultural and social transformations related to political change, (Molina Jiménez, 2015). Also, it is possible to assert that the EA's first curricula were certainly influenced by the spirit of 68 and by the experimental architectures seen at the AA, hence a sort of radical attitude was always present, (Bertheau, 2014). The experimental spirit of the EA's first years – infused by its intellectual founders and key personas – seems to have been shared by most students and the rest of the staff, but its implications often carried different meanings. As Eva Díaz affirms regarding the experiences at the famous Black Mountain College:

⁶ Artists and also graduates from the AA and other institutions do form part of the teaching staff, however collective practices related to art and official links between institutions seems to have faded. In recent years, these condition has started to change, however future studies will be needed to review impact.

⁷ In the 1980's Costa Rica, as many other Latin American countries, experienced an economical crisis associated with oil prices, inflation and a failing economical model. The impact of the economical depression in education has been studied in detailed by scholars. Some of the School's conditions listed above are, undoubtedly, associated with this crisis. "La Intervención" saw the end of the 1980's decade at a time where teaching practices and culture had become damaging for staff and students. The auditing processes and its effects have not been academically studied yet.

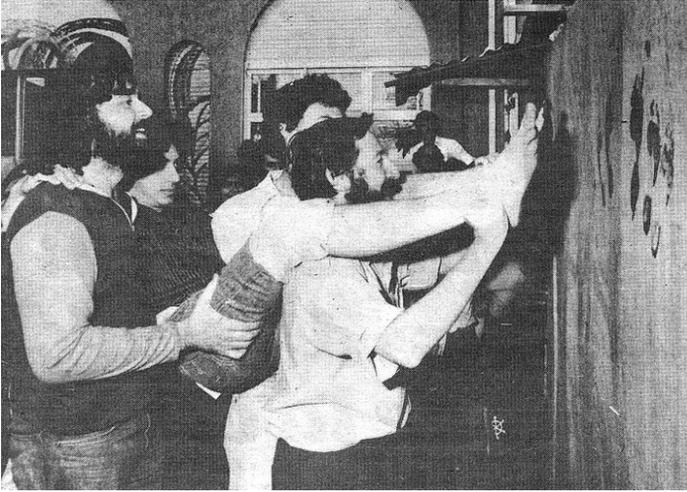


Figure 3. Students in the School of Architecture in the mid 1970's. The School's first years were marked by aspirations to experiment, seek individual knowledge and develop free from "prejudice" design processes. The image is part of the collection of architect Rodolfo Granados and it also part from the School's archive. It shows a group of students performing ludic activities

Seemingly everyone who attended Black Mountain College shared a desire to experiment, though they did not necessarily agree on what this meant. In particular, competing and even incompatible approaches to experimentation were advanced (...). (Díaz, 2015, p.1)

As Díaz points out, in the case of Black Mountain, interdisciplinary discussions were "glued" by the desire to experiment (Díaz, 2015, p.4). Díaz affirms, however that "the frequent invocation of the experiment (...) cannot disguise the fact that the concept to which appealed was and remains deeply contradictory" (Díaz, 2015, p.4). This may also apply to the case of the EA. As the author suggests contradiction around the concept has to do with the "compound meanings of the word experiment" and also with the "the historically shifting relationship between concepts such as innovation and tradition, or originality and routine" (Díaz, 2015, p.4).

A short account of recent events

In October 2019, a large group of architecture students – approximately 150 from an active population of 600 – decided to hold and shut down the building of the School of Architecture at the University of the UCR. The students' decision occurred in the middle of a political crisis triggered by attempts of the government of Costa Rican president Carlos Alvarado to internally redistribute part of the national funding destined, by law, to public universities. These attempts led to a series of protests in the students body of the four main public universities: *Universidad de Costa Rica*, *Universidad Nacional*, *Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica* and *Universidad Nacional a Distancia*, and were criticised by the universities' high authorities who considered them potential violations to the autonomy of higher public education in Costa Rica. Autonomy for universities is rendered a historical achievement of the social-democracy that ruled and influenced the national agenda in the second half of the twentieth century, (Miranda Camacho, 2010).

During these events, other various buildings within the UCR main campus, *Ciudad Universitaria Rodrigo Facio*, located in the outskirts of the capital city of San José were taken and shut down by students, such as the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Social Sciences. Actions were replicated in other campuses⁸. While the EA's building was shut down, on October 22 of 2019 students and staff of public universities marched to protest against the government' intention to partially control the distribution of the higher education mandatory fund or *Fondo Especial para la Educación Superior* (FEES) a fund that by law guarantees an 1.5% of the country's gross product to be destined to public higher education and allows universities to invest their capital without the interference of the central government⁹. The UCR, as the country's largest higher education receives

⁸ The other universities mentioned also had their own movements, this paper will focus on those within the UCR. The UCR has various campuses throughout the country.

⁹ The FEES in negotiated every 5 years by the four deans of the public universities and the central government.

57% of the FEES. At the end of that day, the four deans of the four universities, students representation and the president himself sat down to negotiate. Negotiations eventually led to the government's apparent acceptance of the universities terms. However, at the moment this paper was written conflicts and legal processes were still on course regarding budget allocation.

On that day, the emblematic building of the EA – designed by Edgar Brenes – appeared covered in black fabrics by the students' decision: a performative act suggesting an intention to expose a political stance regarding the events cited above, but also an intent to raise questions about the role of the EA and its ability to adapt to a world in transformation – *see figure 4* –. According to students voices, an intention to allow discussion and promote eventual transformation was fundamental in their decisions and actions¹⁰. Overall, the act of covering the six-story building seems to have had more symbolic impact over the students and the staff than the result itself. Although timid, their action could be considered as performance in the sense that it implicated an active and physical involvement from the students' body. In it, the building served as the stage and also as a subject, one trying to tell a story of action over concerns about the future.

Performative arts as a means to expose concerns

In order to reopen the building and resume regular activities, the student group negotiated with the EA's principal to allow for time and spaces – otherwise dedicated to formal teaching – to discuss the School's current condition and needs of transformation ideas as identified by students. During these negotiated spaces, students designed a series of small performative events with the aim to expose specific circumstances that needed to be made visible from their perspective.

¹⁰ Refer to first footnote.



Figure 4. School of Architecture at the University of Costa Rica in black fabrics, taken by the author, 2019

One of the exercises simulated the future location of restrooms inside the design studios. The performance objective was to point out the need to discuss the built intervention, its aesthetics and impact over the current layout and consequent functionality of the space. The design, according to students – and a portion of faculty members – lacked integration with the EA's building, which was designed in the late seventies by one of its intellectual founders. Historically, the building has had a deficiency in the amount and quality of the restrooms for reasons related to the original design layout, budget and failure to adapt to changes in population, policies and regulations. However, the UCR's proposal to build restrooms affecting the open layout of the building have raised questions about its quality and impact.

Another exercise, which calls for a future and more detailed assessment, attempted to criticise the nature of a skills test – *Prueba de Habilidad* – which is



Figure 5. A performance replicated the dispositions of desks in the plaza outside the EA's building, courtesy of Juan Leiva, an advanced architecture student, 2019

mandatory for admission at the EA¹¹. The test attempts to measure the skills of future architecture students regarding space, construction and problem solving. Usually at the test, future students are given a list of materials and a problem that needs to be spatially solved using those materials. The nature and contents of the skills test will not be examined here, however I would like to point out that a future exploration of its nature seems necessary. In this text, the skills test is only of interest as the event that served as the basis for the students' spatial performance.

From the students' perspective the performance allowed them to point out and express their concerns regarding the future of architecture education within the EA. One of their concerns was related to the skills that future architects are

¹¹ In order to provide brief context: the test was established in 1998 as an intent to control admission and the profile of students. Historically, since then, first year staff and the EA's principals have been involved in the assessment of the test.

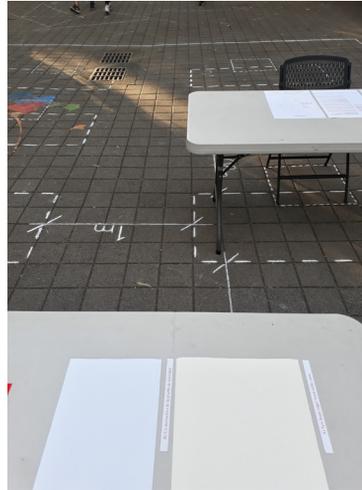


Figure 6. Students replicated the desks's disposition from the skills test, courtesy of Juan Leiva, 2019

expected to have in a changing environment, shaped by social, environmental and economical crisis. Furthermore, the silent performance about the disposition of the desks during the test, the providing of the list of allotted materials and the “mocking” of the given instructions attempted to show an implied rigidity in the test itself. Perhaps, the acting performance also exposed the consolidation to seek for an inherent “talent” for technical construction rather than for other types of spatial intuitions and knowledges. This sort of profiling seems to be latent in teaching practices since admission. However, it needs to be further examined.

Opportunities for Dissidence?

Students were interested in discussing the future of the EA in the specific context of Costa Rica. These events, and their performative nature, could be considered attempts to dissent from the institutionalised canon – transfered in architecture

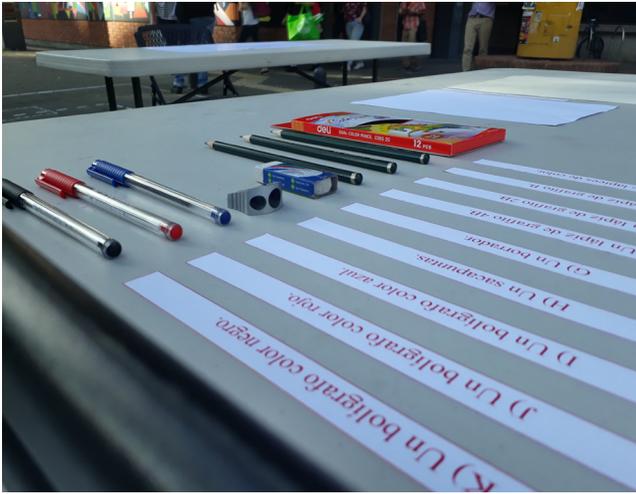


Figure 7. Students also listed the materials that are employed at the skills test. Courtesy of Juan Leiva, 2019

schools – of what architecture professionals need to know and are expected to do. In other words, performative events served to partially question the skills and knowledges that future architects are expected to have. The building shut down was, as one anonymous student claims, an attempt to achieve “something related to the nature of their training in architecture”. This is relevant, as Magali Sarfatti Larson suggests, because “the autonomous discourse of the profession – the knowledge it produces by and for itself – is articulated, transmitted, and, above all, received in schools” (Sarfatti Larson, 1995, p.11). The students’ spatial performances seem to have operated as a sort of opposition, as a sort of obstacle to this rigid autonomous discourse that promotes technical knowledges. They were small-scaled and rather timid. However, they represent an opportunity to systematically question the role of the school and the profession in Costa Rica. They were opportunities for dissidence, as they attempted to “question the relationship of the architect and political power, (...) between ideology and the

built form” (Weizman, 2014, p.7) an this case the relationship between a school, the cluster of knowledges and skills it offers and its students. For the EA, these spatial performances offered an opportunity to promote a collective discussion about disciplinary boundaries. At the same time, crossings with performative arts seem to offer possibilities when exposing critical or theoretical problems. Because of its “dramatic nature” they allowed the exploration of architecture related problems from different perspectives, hence offering chances for new readings concerned with architectural training.

These “spatial performances” seem to constitute an opportunity to explore dissent in relationship to architecture’s disciplinary boundaries and reduced or simplistic notions about design and building and the social role of architects. As Alberto Pérez-Gómez affirms: “the experience of architecture is never merely spatial, and yet what passes today for architectural design is often no more than a manipulation of geometric spatial concepts”. As Pérez Gómez continues “our lived world is rich in sensations and emotions that arise from our bodily actions and engagement in the world” (Pérez-Gómez, 2016, p.16). Pérez Gómez establishes a connection between architecture and the dramatic arts, by recalling how the use of the word *architect* in dramatic plays of classical tradition.

The call “to architect” appears in works such as Cyclops by Euripides and Peace by Aristophanes, plays that reveal the cultural roots, connotations, and expectations associated with the person of the architect and his actions, a term that would eventually (a few centuries later) give its name to the latin discipline of Architectura. This understanding adds a new dimension to the more conventional understanding of the architect as “master craftsman”, which has been taken for granted in most histories of architecture. (Pérez-Gómez, 2016, p.16)

The dimension, Pérez Gómez refers to opens a series of possibilities, again associated with the exploration of the discipline boundaries utilising

performative practices, not only as interdisciplinary tools but as inherent pieces of architecture's own core. Also, political and environmental transformations suggest the need to formulate new questions, regarding the skills that are developed within architecture schools through certain pedagogical practices and studio exercises. This seems relevant in school located in the Global South, as performative practices may also serve to challenge notions of development, design and architectural culture.

In the case of the EA, opportunities to include performative exercises seem to have the potential to aid in the construction of critical analysis. However in order for these efforts to become effective in opening discussions about the EA's course and its syllabuses, continuity and systematisation seem necessary. In that sense, recollections and archival work addressing the EA's history offer new perspectives regarding the role of performative events in the EA's academic culture.

This work is part of a research project hosted by the School of Architecture and funded by the Vice-rectoría de Investigación of the Universidad de Costa Rica. I particularly thank the students who collaborated and shared their experiences. In the COVID scenario, their efforts seem to have faded and hopefully will be soon resumed.

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