

THE COMMUNE AS AN ALTERNATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION: THE CASE OF EASA (EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS ASSEMBLY)

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Abstract

For a while now in the realm of architectural discourse there have been polemics regarding the state of contemporary higher education. The circumstances of the profession are changing rapidly and the academia fails to keep up with the pace. Our society needs scholars capable of critical outside-the-box thinking since it seems that currently standard solutions are often inapplicable.

Driven by students' popular demand for learning experiences outside the framework of a conventional curriculum, this paper aims to explore an alternative method of knowledge transmission in a commune-like setting as well as argue its promising potential to nurture both critical thinking and personal development and hence be highly successful in better preparing architects to be able and willing to respond to the quickly altering conditions of the profession and society in general.

The notion of the commune as an alternative learning experience is examined by means of a case study of one representative initiative: European Architecture Students Assembly (EASA). In the process of exploration of the topic, parallels are drawn, revisiting eminent examples of critical pedagogical experiments as well as cultural phenomena such as Ghost Lab, the Antiuniversity of London, Drop City, the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS), Burning Man, etc.

In its essence, EASA is a two-week long event, composed of workshops, lectures and projects, united under a certain relevant theme, which brings together under one roof above 400 participants from 50 nationalities and functions similar to a commune. In addition, it is a truly bottom-up, meaning it is initiated by scholars for scholars; it is non-profit, self-governed and has no headquarters or typical hierarchical structure; each year it happens in a different country and is organized by a different group of volunteers.

EASA's mission is to challenge the common perception of what architectural body of knowledge should comprise. Be it by one-to-one scale interventions in the urban fabric, guerrilla action and participatory design enterprises or by discussions and presentations (to name a few), during EASA students somewhat implicitly learn how to observe, analyse, evaluate and intervene within real-life conditions as well as how to share ideas and visions. As a result, the vague and illusive skill of critical thinking is fostered in a seemingly hippy-like environment that most universities stand to learn something from (or merely be reminded of).

One must note that this paper does not present the communal experience as a replacement of predominant practices in higher education. However, it concludes that alternative formats like EASA should be further stimulated and encouraged as they provide participants with multilateral understanding that stretches beyond ordinary schooling and cannot be obtained within the framework of traditional academia.

Keywords: Commune, alternative, architectural education, learning experience, EASA, European Architecture Students Assembly, critical thinking, experiment, pedagogy, workshop.