

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.

1 INTRODUCTION

“Crisis, Crisis, Everywhere” (Neveu, 2015), “Architectural Education Must Change” (Jacob, 2013), “Architecture Continues to Implode: More Insiders Admit the Profession Is Failing” (Shubow, 2015), “Architectural Education: A Call to Arms” (Slessor, 2012), “Rethinking Architectural Education” (Buchanan, 2012), “License to Think” (deLariviere, 2015), “Alternative Routes for Architecture” (Hunter, 2012) – these titles, a brief selection from a number of similarly themed texts, serve as a proof that the majority of stakeholders in the process of architectural education are in agreement that the function of academia and its relation to society and the profession need to be revised. There is a common urge for a shift in paradigm. However, there is also an absence of a shared collective perspective for a change which would resonate with the current condition of the world. This limbo of uncertainty and lack of direction results in many students turning to alternative formats outside the walls of university, of which currently there is a vast and diverse plethora. This paper explores one of them, namely the commune as a learning experiences.

2 EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS ASSEMBLY

The final statement of the first European Architecture Students Assembly (EASA), held in 1981 in Liverpool, declares its success is due to “more than the simple addition of individual factors. It is the whole process, the chemistry of being together” (EASA, 1981). More than three decades later, this idea lives on as EASA nowadays defines itself as “a platform for exchange of ideas and knowledge for European students of architecture” (EASA Community, 2000).

2.1 Organisation overview

EASA is a self-organised, self-governed, non-hierarchical initiative for communication, generation of new visions and experiences between architecture students from all over Europe, thus creating an independent, non-political and non-profit professional network. There are several principles that help guide the community and are recognized as its defining characteristics.

2.1.1 EASA is bottom-up and self-organized

EASA started as an alternative to the conventional mode of education “...with the idea that students could recruit their own teachers and organize their own school (Hochschule Liechtenstein, 2009).” Ever since, all events are organised for students by students or young professionals and participation is voluntary. As a result, a confluence of highly motivated people occurs.

2.1.2 EASA is non-political and non-profit

EASA has no constant affiliation with or dependency from any external educational, governmental or private establishment. The organisation is prone to collaboration with local communities, institutions and industries on account of its successful integration within the selected context. Yet, it is protective of its sovereignty since, through negating oversight from trustees and other interested parties, it guarantees its autonomy in decision and policy making. Although sponsorship for the happenings is a common practice, all initiatives are funded predominantly on the basis of participation fees for the annual meetings, which cover the expenses for accommodation, facilities, materials, etc. Membership is free of charge as the main capital of EASA is ideas.

2.1.3 EASA is egalitarian and non-hierarchical

EASA is an egalitarian community. There is no established hierarchy despite certain distributions of responsibilities. Decision-making is usually a consensual process. The organisation functions rather loosely through a horizontal network of peers who are all encouraged to share visions, opinions and arguments. Furthermore, members do not “prioritise agenda or hold bias that is discriminatory or that could be perceived as exclusive... towards: gender, race, sexuality or perceptive minority” (EASA Index, 2014). This creates a truly liberal and tolerant environment perfectly suitable for uninhibited conscious self-expression.

2.1.4 EASA is a platform for exchange of knowledge, ideas and experiences

EASA is a series of meetings, a community and at the same time a platform focused around alternative methods of conversion of knowledge. The premise is to bring together people who strive for personal and professional evolution, who are eager to cross the boundaries of conventional practises of passive absorption of both information and ideas and embrace an unorthodox approach aiming at critical thought

through a process of experiential and inquiry-based learning - notions proposed decades ago by arguably some of the most influential theorists in the milieu of progressive education such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, David A. Kolb and Donald Schön.

2.2 Main assembly

The main manifestation of EASA is a two-week long annual assembly, composed of workshops, lectures, debates and social events, united under a certain relevant theme. Yet, what makes it stand out among comparable formats, of which there are plenty, is the fact that it is student-driven and has no headquarters or permanent governing structure. Each year it happens in a different country and is organised by a different group of volunteers. In addition, the scale and diversity of the summit are rather notable. It brings together over 400 students from around 50 nationalities who have the following things in common: being part of a European community, being passionate about architecture and being open to experimentation.

2.2.1 Actors

The people involved in EASA are generally (but not always limited to) architecture students. Depending on their primary activity, they can be categorised as National Contacts (NCs), Organisers, Tutors, Participants, Helpers.

The backbone of the platform are the so called National Coordinators (NCs), two representatives per each participating country, who are responsible for the distribution of information, organisational affairs and “communication at the international and national level” (EASA Index, 2000). They serve as the main protagonists and ambassadors of the idea of EASA and ensure the continuity of its legacy.

The Organisers are a crew of volunteers who two years prior to the assembly are trusted by the NCs on behalf of the network members with the responsibility to curate, fund, manage, accommodate and facilitate workshops, participants, lectures and other activities.

The Tutors (who are either students, or young professionals) are the major actors in the core activity of EASA, namely the workshops. Months before the main meeting they propose to the organisers a concept, methodology and a schedule for the conduction of a two week long experimental project, during which they facilitate learning by providing theoretical or practical guidance and support to those involved in the enterprise.

The people on the other end of the workshop process are referred to as Participants. Together with their tutor(s) they develop the project they are engaged in. In order to join the assembly, interested students compete in a selection procedure, managed by the NCs, as there is a quota for each country. There are no strict rules according to which participants compete. However, applying via an essay, project or poster is a common practice.

As the daily management of an event of such scale is a rather laborious task, Helpers are recruited to assist the Organisers with tasks of various character. They are crucial to the successful coordination because of the constant necessity for support of various nature inevitable for a happening of this scale.

2.2.2 Circumstances

Despite the formal division of responsibilities, everyone is expected to contribute to the development of projects and the running of the assembly as EASA is an unendowed enterprise. Duties regarding the maintenance of the campus, materials, tools and food arrangements are scheduled in shifts and distributed equally among partakers.

All activities are intended as communal, including meals, properties and belongings storage and sleeping. Therefore, personal utensils and a sleeping bag are a necessity. Facilities and accommodation provide rather basic and lean living conditions. Being that EASA campuses are temporary and the chosen venues tend to be unconventional, issues like climate control and running water may occur. Another typical issue is provision of resources for the timely execution of workshops. Material and tools are usually scarce but sufficient.

However, none of these unusual circumstances prevent students from joining or properly taking advantage of the events, which are carried out during it. If anything, the group responsibility for the happening and the lack of exuberance seem to bring participants closer together and provoke them to adapt to the fluctuating or undesirable conditions.

2.2.3 Programme

The nucleus of the assembly are the workshops. Usually at EASA there are approximately 30 of them. They can be differentiated into four relative categories: constructive, theoretical, compound and media. Projects vary from one-to-one scale installations, material and structural studies, product and graphic design, to small interventions, installations and performances. In the beginning of the assembly tutors present to the rest of the community their concept and premise for a project. The following day a fair is set up where participants and tutors meet face to face and discuss workshop specific. Students chose which venture they want to join and enlist. Tutors on the other hand are also in the position to decide on whether they would like to collaborate with a particular individual. In brief, it is a process of mutual selection based on personal interaction. After the teams are identified, they gather, get to know each other, start discussion and work on the project.

The programme includes a set of relevant to the theme lectures given by professionals. They, while being a more traditional form of presentation of ideas, provide a framework and a guideline for other planned activities as well as a topic for subsequent discourse. A limited number of intentional discussions are organised as those, among other forms of group interaction, occur spontaneously but perpetually. However, meetings regarding interim reviews of the network and the summit and trajectories for their improvement are regularly held.

As far entertainment is concerned, the line between project related activities and recreation is ambiguous and difficult to draw since they seem to intertwine in terms of where, when and how then happen. Generally, the atmosphere during EASA is festive even during stressful episodes of the workshop process or in case of unforeseen undesirable external factors. Thus, contributing for the overall spirit of the assembly. A notable event that has become a tradition is the National evening when each country is represented by its members by means of national customs and cuisine. It is an instrument for cultural exchange as well as a celebration. Another special occasion is the EASA day during which the campus and workshops are open to the public and people from the host location are encouraged to make themselves familiar with the method and activities of the assembly. The final presentation and exhibition of the workshops' doing and results are also accessible to anyone concerned.

2.3 History

The origins of EASA can be traced back to 1981 when in Liverpool, England a summer gathering for architectural students was initiated by Richard Murphy and Geoff Haslam as a continuation of Brian Anson's ideas of The Winter Schools of the late 1970s in Britain. The purpose of the meeting was to contemplate and respond to the problems and condition of the respective professional and educational realm together with fellow scholars across Europe, who the organisers contacted, invited to join and kept in touch via mail (a rather laborious endeavour given that the number of the attending was approximately 300). When describing the summit upon its completion, the pioneers focus on the notion of communication: "It was an informal occasion in which students could express themselves, their views, and simply get to know each other...Personal contact between students and tutors from different European countries gave us the opportunity to exchange professional information, different attitudes towards architecture and the environment, conflicting views of style and present trends and also ideas of our role as individuals and students and future architects in society" (EASA, 1981). It is remarkable how close these objective are to the visions and strives of EASA as it is today.

Since the Liverpool Workshops of 1981, the assembly travelled to "some of the continents hotbeds, such as Delft, Aarhus and Turin; it has been held in such ambitious and inspiring locations behind the Berlin Wall in 1988, on a semi-renovated WWII freighter on the bank of the Danube in Budapest and on a train running free on 100 miles of secluded track in Scandinavia" (EASA United Kingdom, Welcome Guide 2010).

Through the years, partially due to the advances of the media and various means of communication, in addition to the much easily accessible nowadays international travel, the EASA has evolved from a yearly meeting of architecture students into a connector-organisation which establishes long-term links between people with similar perspectives for the profession and society in general.

3 RELEVANT CASES

In the record of critical pedagogies, counterculture and alternative exploratory practises of learning in the milieu of art, architecture and the humanities, there are numerous instances which provide similar to that of EASA process and/or environment. The urge for collective social or learning experiences is hardly a new

trend in educational or cultural experimental practices worldwide. Yet, much like in the 60's and 70's, today we observe a substantial growth in the number of such initiatives.

Following is an investigation of five examples of alternative forms of interaction within which exchange of knowledge occurs. The choice of those particular cases is based on the variety of settings, methods and circumstances through which learning can take place, as well as the legacy and social impact they currently have or have had historically.

3.1 The Antiuniversity of London

The Antiuniversity of London, despite its short life, is one of those mythological organizations of the 1960s that aided significantly to not only revolutionizing our idea of education, but also setting a whole cultural shift in motion. The notorious anti-institution started its official activity on February 12th 1968 in a rented space in East London, months before the Paris revolution. The major figures behind the project were David Cooper and Alan Krebs. Yet, the origin of the initiative can be rooted to Joseph Berke's concept of anti-hospital.

The goal was to construct an alternative pedagogical model as a response to the dissatisfactory status quo. It was an experiment in self-organisation and self-governed education, which questioned the hierarchical structures of conventional establishments, as well as their narrow-mindedness, archaism and exclusivity, and argued for the deinstitutionalisation of knowledge. The inherent antagonism in the name of the initiative can be read in the description of the agenda of the organisation by one of its core protagonists as "an attempt to bring together under one roof all kinds of things that are not permitted at established universities or ... aren't accessible to 95% of the population" (Krebs, 1968).

The promise of the Antiuniversity was rather ambitious: "It will be the meeting ground for examination, exploration, discussion, discovery, epiphany, and revelation. It will be a place where incisive and visionary scholars, artists and activists will meet and relate their ideas and work to those who care to be presented with them" (Antiuniversity 1968). The core of the syllabus gravitated around the topics of "radical politics, existential psychiatry and the artistic avant-garde" (Watts, 2010). Given that the humble headquarters of the anti-institution in Shoreditch, London brought together prominent avant-garde artists of the time, as well as thinkers and people affiliated with counter-culture and other social movements of the time, who were all fighting for the same cause, it is hardly surprising that by "the spring of 1968, the Antiuniversity had turned into a commune where many of the students integrated living, learning, education and the everyday in one space" (Jakobsen 2013).

Due to lack of funds and reconcilable differences with regards to the organisation of the school itself, the noninstitution gave up its home, dispersed its activity and the barely existent framework for courses collapsed into even less formal gatherings and talks hosted at various places (some of them private residences) all over London. Yet, as the author of "The Antiuniversity Research Project" and "The AntiTabloid" contests, "The principle of the Antiuniversity continues today, whenever people meet and share critical knowledge and revolution in their everyday" (Jakobsen, 2013).

3.2 The Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies

The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS or as it is often referred to - the Institute) is a New York City legend. To support this statement, hereby are listed some of the names the establishment has been given through time: "a student mecca" (Goldenberger, 1975), "the high-minded architectural community's equivalent of Woodstock" (Freeman, 2014), "great 20th-century think tank" (Birignani, 2011), to name a few. The reputation of a number of the protagonists affiliated with the IAUS among who are: Eisenman, Koolhaas, Tschumi, Frampton, Tafuri and Vidler, goes even further to prove the point made.

Imagined in 1965 in the heart of NYC by, as Mark Wigley puts it: "a group of people that didn't know they were a group until they realized that only by being together could they activate some of their fantasies of what was possible" (The making of an Avant-Garde: The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies 1967-1984, 2013), the Institute is reputed to have almost single-handedly transformed the course of architecture theory and the way it is perceived as well as its role in education and practice.

Essentially being a non-profit independent think-tank, bridging pedagogy, practice and research together, IAUS presented itself as an alternative to institutionalized education, despite the fact that it was supported by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and Cornell University. It aspired to promote architecture within the public realm and "fill the gaps between the training of professional architects and the study of architecture as a humanist discipline" (Bartos, 1979). To that purpose, in the timeframe between 1965 and 1984 IAUS conducted rigorous ateliers and studies (some in collaboration with government agencies), housed

exhibitions and lecture series of prominent figures and ideas of that time, and delivered several publications including "Oppositions" and "Skyline".

The Institute (both the idea and the physical place) was a generator of visionary ideas about architecture as well as contemporary society. The catalyst for those visions might be due to historical conjuncture. Yet, more likely the success of the avant-garde group was the simple fact that they were a unity. "You were either with us or against us" comments founder Peter Eisenman (The making of an Avant-Garde: The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies 1967-1984, 2013). They were an elite commune of ambitious intellectual aristocrats.

3.3 The Ghost Architectural Laboratory

The Ghost Architectural Laboratory (also known as Ghost Lab or simply Ghost) is defined by its founder and director Brian MacKey-Lyons, an educator, architect and expert in interpreting the vernacular in his designs, as "an educational initiative designed to promote the transfer of architectural knowledge through direct experience - project-based learning taught in the master-builder tradition – with emphasis on issues of landscape, material, culture, and community" (MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects Limited, 2005).

The first edition of the sort of design-and-build summer camp took place in 1994, on the premises of MacKey-Lyon's family property on the east coast of Nova Scotia. For the following years (until 2011) a small group of students, architects and academics, a master builder and an engineer would gather to conduct the annual Ghost Lab, named after the phantom of the old settlement that used to be there, of which some remnants are still preserved. With guidance from their instructor and more experienced members of their group, the participants would spend two weeks of an intense workshop. The first week is dedicated to site and environment analysis, conceptual design as well as general discussions on the issues of intervention in a specific context in terms of place, memory, landscape and community. In the next seven days the idea is materialized. Each aspect of the rigorous construction phase is carried out by the students themselves who in the process learn about tools, materials, building techniques and eventually come to know how to actually make a small piece of architecture from scratch.

Apart from being a research programme, Ghost is also "an architectural education centre in the tradition of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin or Samuel Mockbee's Rural Studio. The permanent structures which now occupy the site among the ruins - tower, studio, cabins, barns and boathouse – are, in part, products of the design/build curriculum itself. They provide accommodation for the program and a venue for community events" (The American Institute of Architects, 2015).

Advocate for the virtue of traditional regional architecture, craftsmanship and nature, Brian MacKey-Lyons created an immediate hands-on yet very poetic collaborative learning experiment, during which participants begin to function as a small community with a shared vision. In his article Seven Stories from a Village Architect, Ghost's director illustrates this collective spirit with a story of how the first workshop concluded: "On the last day, we finished, exhausted, and built a huge fire in the old hearth. As darkness fell the Ghost lit up in the fog like a magical lamp. The cattle watched from the shadows as, spontaneously, over 100 neighbours and friends were attracted to the Ghost; people who had farmed here...Ghost stories followed late into the night, on the dirt floor inside" (Brian MacKay-Lyons, 1995).

3.4 The Burning Man Project

Words fail in an attempt to identify a category which Burning Man can be assigned to. It characterises itself simultaneously as an event, a culture and a network: "A city in the desert. A culture of possibility. A network of dreamers and doers", "a temporary metropolis dedicated to community, art, self-expression, and self-reliance." (The Burning Man Project, 2015). The agenda of the project is to discover and express your innermost self through art and in relation to others and undergo a truly transformative experience. It could be considered an open-ended learning experience as it certainly develops among others one's emotional intelligence, imagination and creative ability.

Burning man was initiated by two young makers, Larry Harvey and Jerry James in 1986 on Baker Beach in San Francisco. In collaboration with Kevin Evans, John Law, Michael Mikel (cacophonists, who were looking for solitude and freedom of spirit and being), the group relocated the enterprise to Black Rock Dessert, Nevada, USA. Through the years, they have developed the initial modest installation of a 2.4 meter-tall wicker bonfire into the cultural phenomenon it is today, attended by 60.000 people from various walks of life, with diverse backgrounds and of different age.

Partaking at Burning Man is indeed a boundary-crossing endeavour. For the brief period of a week, every

summer its habitat in the Nevada Dessert becomes a no man's land where the presumptions and restrictions of society's common manifestations do not apply, leaving an option to rigorously question everything in the search of your own reasoning. This immense freedom of the individual, combined with the wide diversity of happenings and the scale of the event itself, are some of the defining attributes of Burning man today. Yet, at the same time, they might present potential hazards. In order to prevent incidents, despite the fact that the health and prosperity of the community is reliant above all on the mutual trust, cooperation, tolerance and openness of its members, one of the co-founders, Larry Harvey, composed "the 10 Principles of Burning Man" – guidelines, which reflect "the community's ethos and culture as it had organically developed since the event's inception" (The Burning Man Project, 2015). The reference to the 10 commandments from "The Bible" is implicit and indicative to the cult status of the utopian impermanent community attempting to redefine contemporary society.

3.5 Drop City

In his profound essay entitled "Communities of Consciousness. From Drop City to the Digital", Fred Turner paints an intense picture of how one of the notorious communes of the 60s, the artistic project known as Drop City, came into being: "In the summer of 1965, a ragtag handful of long-haired young men ambled into a Colorado junkyard with axes in their hands. One after another they climbed onto the tops of broken-down sedans and wagons and began to hack away at their roofs. The junkyard owner charged them fifteen cents for each sheet of metal they managed to chop free. Every evening, they hauled their car tops home and cut them into panels, which they welded into what soon became a village of multi-coloured geodesic domes, perched on the open plains" (Turner 2015). This amalgam of lust for anarchy and creative spirit combined with the primal urge to build a better world for ourselves is embedded in the ethos of Drop City.

Driven by their utter faith in technology being key to the salvation of humanity and influenced by the likes of John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Robert Rauschenberg and Buckminster Fuller in either their body of work or their pedagogy at Black Mountain College, several art students purchased a large piece of land in Colorado, USA, built themselves a habitat in the form of geodesic domes out of scrap metal and experimented with art, building structures and passive solar design. According to one of its original members, "it functioned as an alternative research centre" (Spatial Agency, 2009).

The four original founders, Gene and JoAnn Bernofsky, Richard Kallweit and Clark Richert, established an extremely liberal policy for Drop City, named after the form of "drop art" but also infused with the idea of "dropping out" of what is conventionally understood as civilization. It "had no requirements for membership: anyone could show up, stay as long as they liked, and do whatever they chose" (Sreenivasan, 2008). In addition, there was no form of structured governance or control. Life was rather *laissez-faire*.

The commune quickly gained popularity and in 1967 hosted "Joy Festival", a continuation of the hippie "Summer of Love" in San Francisco. The event overpopulated the land as many decided to stay permanently in Drop City. This instigated the demise of the commune as pioneer members left within two years, and in time were followed by others. By 1973 Drop City ended. (Sreenivasan, 2008).

4 THE COMMUNE AS ALTERNATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Looking into the etymology and definition of the word "commune", notions of sharing and collective living often come across. Fundamentally, the commune is an alternative social organism bringing together a union of like-minded people, existing and cooperating with each other in a symbiotic manner, thus creating a fruitful environment for mutual learning and free self-expression.

4.1 The commune

There are multiple types of communes categorised on the general purpose for collective habitation: cooperative, countercultural, egalitarian, political, spiritual, artistic, experimental, etc. The way they are organized varies greatly.

Formations of religious or political character will be excluded from the current examination, as they present an extreme, currently less relevant examples of the idea of cooperation, where the purpose of gathering can be considered as external to the group. Instead, the investigation will focus on unions of people based on shared interest in either rejecting the limitations of conventional society or reinventing both themselves and the world in general (cooperative, countercultural, egalitarian, artistic, experimental, etc. according to the previously mentioned typology). These cases, too, exhibit a range of different attributes.

However, some core beliefs, integral to the commune as an idea and valid for the majority of its

manifestations, can be outlined. Many thinkers have been engaged with the intriguing concept of alternative culture and lifestyle and how it comes into being. Among them is Ron E. Roberts, author of "The New Communes: Coming Together in America", who concludes that the primary characteristics most communes display are being egalitarian, of small scale and opposed to bureaucracy (Roberts, 1971). Yet, according to Bill Metcalf, long-time researcher of the phenomenon of "shared visions" and "shared lives", the principles that are widely appropriated among experiments in cohabitation are a collective household, equality in decision-making, a common purpose and the priority of the well-being of the group to that of the individual (Metcalf, 1996). Furthermore, self-reliance, direction and collective intent can be added to that list. Ultimately, an average commune is a diverse group of people with a mutual pursuits, intellectual and/ or physical resources, as well as a relatively non-hierarchical and autonomous organisation. What goes beyond this definition is the ethos of these forms of small alternative societies and the modus operandi of the human behaviour within one.

4.2 The commune as an alternative learning experience

The culture of the commune promotes a higher connectivity, coherence and relevance between its members. Emotional engagement and camaraderie are embedded in the philosophy of such collective endeavours, since the environment stimulates tolerance, equality and inclusivity. This point is precisely what makes communal environment very hospitable toward processes of learning and creation. Establishing relationships between members based on trust, liberty of speech and spirit is very likely to result in a culture of open transmission of knowledge through multiple forms of interaction: collaboration, discussion or merely observation.

Besides, taking a stand against issues of prejudice, competition and small-mindedness as a part of their unwritten code of conduct, consequentially, commune members embrace intimacy, freedom of self-expression, and sense of belonging to a larger whole. As a result, a transformation is instigated not only in the people within the group as individuals, but the entire "group dynamic" (Lewin, 1947) and attitude as well. A non-hierarchical setting where casting judgment is strongly frowned upon and a person's or a work's value/success is not assigned on the basis of what is conventionally considered of merit presupposes an atmosphere of experimentation and critical thinking. When the notion of failure is non-existent, the trial and error approach as well as the often suppressed process of exploration of one's own truth, both of which are paramount for the evolution of thinking and imagination, is often appropriated, effectively so.

The circumstances exposed above serve as a solid arguments for the existence of that many art communes, art colonies, residence programmes and short term events which combine cohabitation with collective making. Not to mention the objective benefits of such initiatives in terms of the usual case of an immediate context fostering concentration, inspiration and creativity. Given that shift of mind set of the group, the simple provision of time spent together in addition to a space (especially an accommodating one) to host a number of people who tend to think alike might be considered enough of a necessary condition – a catalyst, for starting a community. Think of Parisian cafes which used to be the common ground of the Expressionists; of Gentlemen's clubs in New York and London which comprised of the intellectual aristocracy and bohemians of the Western nations; of Bauhaus, VKhUTEMAS and Black Mountain College which housed the most daring artists and architects of the time. And last but not least, think of all the contemporary creative hubs, meta-studios, think tanks, incubators, co-working spaces and other alternative learning enterprises which aim to provoke free dissemination of ideas.

5 THE COMMUNE AS AN ALTERNATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS ASSEMBLY

EASA annually reinvents itself. Every year the country and venue where the events are held, the topic around which lecture series and workshops are focused, the team in charge of hosting the assembly, the body of participants, even the graphic identity of the forum change. Yet, there is a sense of continuity in its evolution as there are a number of characteristics fundamental to its identity which remain unchanged.

5.1 EASA as a commune

Essentially, EASA functions like a mini society. Much like members of a commune, participants identify themselves with it and proclaim themselves as EASAIans (akin to partakers in Drop City a.k.a. Droppers or those in The Burning Man Project, respectively - Burners). They perceive the setting of the assembly as a utopian country of their own fringe nation (as scholars at the Antiuniversity of London and at the IAUS used to do). This statement, despite being generalising and rather extreme, is rooted in the very culture and doings of the platform based on the sharing of visions, responsibility and resources, ergo resulting in a

particularly high level of emotional engagement and commitment to a larger cause (settings and outcome comparable to those of the Ghost Architectural Laboratory).

The alternative that EASA presents, possess many of the attributes of an autonomous community. Apart from the previously noted circumstances of communal living and collaborative work in an environment of equality and independence, the network has its own newspaper (Umbrella), video broadcast (EASA TV) and radio (EASA FM) ensuring the distribution of news, data and memos. In addition, during the happenings instead of actual money a substitute currency, the token, is appropriated. Upon arrival at the meeting participants are presented with a welcome pack to familiarise themselves with those specifics along with the schedule, happenings and more importantly the agenda and guiding principles of the community. In addition, everyone is provided a wristband to indicate that they are now part of EASA. This symbolic gesture reaffirms the self-identification of a newcomer to the collective enterprise. In fact, many for whom this is a multiple involvement in the event (referred to as EASA dinosaurs), still wear with pride wristbands from former editions of the gathering like one would – medals or distinctions. Those individuals are key figures for sustaining the so called EASA spirit - an ambiguous notion that is hard to define, still very familiar to anyone who has attended an event. It is also the soul and hidden agenda of the platform – to connect people, to build a culture of mutual caring and unconditional cooperation, an environment cultivating inspiration, creativity and free self-expression.

5.2 EASA as an alternative learning experience

The communal setting of EASA has a decisive impact on the modes of communication of knowledge and ideas during the assembly. The entire event can be considered an alternative form of a learning experience as it comprises a hub of active highly motivated people asking questions and willing to look for answers through making.

5.2.1 Trust and failure

The constant interface and all-encompassing mutuality at EASA eliminates barriers and prohibitions in the interaction between members. Despite being strangers from different nationalities and background, in short time a strong degree of connectivity and trust is established. However, because of the policy of tolerance and lack of distinct hierarchy, conformity and misguided decision-making on account of what is referred to as “groupthink” (William H. Whyte, 1952) are rare. In the development of projects as well as discussions students are urged to freely express arguments and opinions. Although tutors offer support and are permanently available to questions, the creative process of participants can be self-guided to a considerable extent depending on each workshop’s style. In general, the method of trial and error is often appropriated. Testing any idea and undesirable results are considered fundamental to the development of many project at EASA. The reason behind that practice can be found in John Dewey’s concept of reflective thinking and learning form unsuccessful experiments or as popularly known: “instructive failure” (Dewey, 1933).

5.2.2 Hands-on and reflective practice

Applying one’s knowledge or theory in the real world and experimenting in non-hypothetical conditions is a requisite aspect of workshops at EASA as opposed to the abstract milieu associated with the virtual studio environment. What is often referred to the hands-on approach is adopted not exclusively but predominantly in constructive and compound projects, during which participants actually materialise their conceptual designs in either prototypes or full-scale models. Along the course of realisation of the idea, students learn as Brett Steele, current Director of the Architectural Association School of Architecture London, frames it “by getting your hands dirty” (Steele, 2010). More importantly, they improve and gain new skills and understanding “through the making of prototypes and full-scale models whose working difficulties and eventual results offer the designers vital insight and understanding into how they might take a next tentative step forward” (Steele, 2010). The benefits of the “reflection-on-action” method and the practice of deliberate analysis of an experience with the purpose of professional growth, both of which can be observed during the workshops in question, have been exposed by many thinkers. Among them is Donald Schön who introduced the term above in his seminal book “The Reflective Practitioner” (Schön, 1983). Furthermore, participants at EASA carry out those exercises as a part of a team and therefore add to them additional complexity and respectively educational value.

5.2.3 Experiential learning and critical thinking

Workshops and other forms of interaction during the EASA incorporate a series of activities related to the realm of experiential education. Commonly associated with the theories of David A. Kolb, the cycle of

learning from experience includes processes of reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation which, added in that sequence to the concrete experience, constitute the “experiential learning model”. (David A. Kolb, Ronald Eu. Fry, 1974). Explained simply as gaining synthetic knowledge through direct engagement combined with reflective observation and analysis, this paradigm is weaved into the experimental nature of EASA. It is also related to another ambition of the summit - that is to provoke critical thinking. Looking for reasons and profoundly questioning preconceptions is one of the mutual pursuits of students who attend the summit. They tend to do so because the open nature of the forum stimulates and cultivates such behaviour. On the other hand, it is the majority of EASAIans, who in their being free-willed, investigational, informed by experience and reason instead of biases and conventional truths, create that environment. In any case, the assembly is a two-week-long exercise in constant deliberation of ideas, critical analysis, evidence- or reason-driven argumentation, etc., in the process of which one’s intellectual capacities undoubtedly thrive and develop. Hence, students learn. More often than not in a non-explicit manner, they learn from their peers, from their tutors, from their actions and following consequences, from their vibrant immediate environment and the interaction between actors within it.

5.2.4 Self-expression and emotional intelligence

Last but not least, the diverse dynamic, yet highly tolerant culture of EASA provides a hospitable prejudice-free climate for open self-expression through both creation and demeanour. Owing to the coherence of the group - a logical consequence the communal setting, people at the event tend to let go of many inhibitions, which are external or imposed on them. They develop a better sense of self-awareness. In addition, liberated from the need to conform and the fear of rejection from the group, participants in the gathering achieve a state of truly authentic and straightforward communication. Moreover, this allows for a spontaneity and imagination to flourish. The opportunity for multilateral interactions that EASA presents also builds on one’s social skills and ability to convey ideas, arguments and feeling. Mere participating yet alone complete immersion in the spirit of the happening is a prerequisite to personal growth and expansion of one’s mind.

6 CONCLUSION

From the stand point of a young educator and researcher with an interest in alternative learning experiences as well as a multiple attendant at EASA (participant at EASA 2009 and 2010, tutor at EASA 2014 and guest at EASA 2015), I know the value of the communal environment at European Architecture Student Assembly and can relate to the reasoning of people who participate and contribute to either the summit or the network.

As the founding fathers of EASA have once stated, it is “more than the simple addition of individual factors. It is the whole process, the chemistry of being together” (EASA, 1981).

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