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CHAPTER 6

Architects Who Read, ILAUD, and Reading as Direct Experience

Elke Couchez

The city does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.
—Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities

Introduction

This paper takes a historical approach to architecture’s search for its own unique mode of intellectuality in the mid-1970s by focusing on the debate of reading as direct experience.¹ The tool of “reading” the city was central at the International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design (ILAUD), established in 1976 by Spazio e Società’s founder Giancarlo De Carlo (1919–2005). This educational laboratory – an extension of Team X – invited students and acclaimed practitioners from different Western universities to rethink urban form. During ILAUD’s formative years, the physical and social environment of Urbino functioned as a laboratory. All participants were invited to develop strategies for urban interventions based on a thorough understanding of the marks left by social, historical, and topographical transformations on the physical space.

It was a Monday evening: 29 August 1977. A group of students gathered in a room packed with white drawing boards and vacant exhibition walls (fig. 6.1). They had just flown in from different countries in Europe and from the United States, and they were welcomed with a generous wine and cheese party by the
ILAUD staff members. Throughout the year, all of the students had engaged in so-called ‘permanent activities’ and were now ready to start a highly ambitious eight-week residential summer course organised in situ in the Italian town of Urbino (fig. 6.2). Wearing wide-legged jeans, they waited for Giancarlo De Carlo to address them and to kick off the summer school.

In his opening speech, De Carlo vividly talked about the historical town of Urbino, which he knew like the back of his hand from his experience drafting the master plan of the city and the region (fig. 6.3–6.5). He briefly introduced the central themes of the summer school: “reuse” and “participation.” Some students might have noticed his agitation when he talked about the recent post-war developments in the city. Predominantly residential zones, as he told them, were jeopardised by an uncontrolled mix of developer-, state-, and university-sponsored buildings and consequently were disconnected from the historical town centre and the surrounding rural areas. De Carlo told them how such transformations of the physical space always reflect changes in society. He warned his public of mere historicism in the revitalisation of a historic city centre – and encouraged the students to enter into a dialogue between the history of the place and the users’ needs. Urban form, he emphasised, could not be separated from social awareness.

The first four weeks of the residential course in Urbino were devoted to the exercise of “reading,” which allowed the readers to extend their perspectives as much as possible:

If one can read the great palimpsest of the city and the territory one is able to understand everything: the events that occurred through time, the history, the social and cultural development, the sense and the role of the organisational systems and of the architectural forms. But in order to read one needs to be able to look in the depth of the stratifications, to discover and select critically the most significant signs; one needs to design. Our design is “tentative,” meaning that it does not seek for univocal solutions but to match confront the project area with series of hypotheses that unveil its substance and open up the process of its transformation; at the same time they “tempt” it and drive it to talk about its capacity of resisting to change, of how it can be changed in order to attain structures and forms that are appropriate to the circumstances and corresponding to the expectations.

Reading thus was the proposed method to unravel an intricate web of relationships in the physical environment. The role of the designer, according to De Carlo, was to empathetically engage with – or read – the pre-existing layers of meaning and relationships and to articulate them through the activity of drawing.
Fig. 6.1  The ILAUD design studio. Archivio ILAUD, Biblioteca civica d’arte Luigi Poletti, Modena.

Fig. 6.2  Cover of the first ILAUD yearbook. Giancarlo De Carlo, *International Laboratory of Architecture and Design, 1st Residential Course Urbino 1976* (Urbino: ILAUD & Università di Urbino, 1977).
with the cultural atmosphere that could well form the cornerstone for the Community's economic recovery.

Apart from the main highways outside the city and the urban urban centers itself, there is also a dense network of secondary roads serving the rural districts and linking cities with other small communities nearby. In many places the roads are unusable because of the presence of deep ravines, even the parts of the district even further and cutting off settlements from the possible use of electricity for their public communications and the provision of amenities in rural areas, since to be an economical operation, community services must be readily accessible to a reasonable number of people and hence to a sufficiently large area in this era of rural depopulation.

Elementary school facilities are a clear illustration of this last problem. Throughout the Community, there exists a combination of facilities in order to ensure that children of all ages have access to education. In fact, no settlement is more than four kilometers from a school. In recent years, the rural administration has made every effort to fill the major gaps in school facilities, and superficially the situation might appear to
Fig. 6.3–6.5  Spreads from the book Giancarlo De Carlo, Urbino. The History of a City and Plans for Its Development (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1970). De Carlo’s developed his master plan for Urbino from 1958 to 1964. First, De Carlo sent out a housing survey to Urbino’s inhabitants to better view property, use, and activity of individual buildings. The housing survey results were then combined in a series of highly effective visual maps of the city and its region, showing the uses, needs, and “problem areas” at a glance. Finally, based on his maps, De Carlo made recommendations for mixed use of some areas and for which sections of the city should be renewed, with actions going from absolute preservation to renewal of individual buildings to renewal of group of buildings to demolition and rebuilding or demolition without rebuilding.
1. Challenges to Intellectual History

In the introduction of this volume, the editors make a plea for the understanding of architectural practice as a hybrid phenomenon, moving between observing, designing, and writing or between design and discourse. As pedagogical experiments played a crucial role in shaping architectural discourse, this paper travels to the heart of design education to analyse De Carlo’s reading tool. Architecture historians have often been wary of studying the myriad of experiments and activities in the studio because, as James Elkins noted in *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing*:

> personal and largely inarticulate discoveries made in the studio do not seem applicable to finished works that exist in history. Studio talks are riven by ungrammatical arguments, illogic, and nonverbal communication by gestures and marks that conspire to make it nearly illegible to philosophical inquiry.4

This paper argues that, if we want to understand architecture as a hybrid practice, we should not only look at how architects produce knowledge through design and writing but also through the day-to-day activities – such as teaching and reading – that structure architectural research and practice. As Edward Baring (2011) argues, these activities remain a relatively untapped and yet immediate context in intellectual history.5 Though these activities are often overlooked in the core narratives of architectural theory – which primarily focus on published and finished texts – these activities have always been part and parcel of architectural practice. As Jorge Otero-Pailos rightly noted, there is no “mother tongue” in architectural intellectualty:

> Before the rise of what we now call architecture theory, these practices [practices of interpretations in the form of written documents, drawings, pictures or photo essays, movies, scaled models, full-scale buildings, exhibitions, class syllabi, teaching curricula, and countless other forms] were included in what was considered legitimate intellectual work in architecture, not something secondary to mental acts but as their primary source and governing standard.”6

By looking at the tools developed in the design studio, the intellectual historian faces a massive challenge of mining work that is not finished and embracing the contingencies of architectural thought. This paper will unpack the tool of reading the city, not by looking at how students made it operational in their design proposals7 (fig. 6.6–6.7), but by exploring the intellectual arena in which the tool was deployed. De Carlo’s tool of reading the city first of all tied into a post–World War II debate on the illegibility of towns. Second, the tool enabled
and represented a critical stance vis-à-vis the figure of the architectural historian and traditional “linear” historiography. What can we learn from looking at the role of the architect as a reader, rather than seeing the architect merely as a producer of knowledge from a vanguard position?

2. Reading as a Design Act: From Reading to Legibility

In reassessing the design tool of reading the city, we must, first of all, acknowledge that Giancarlo De Carlo’s reflection on how to read urban form in architectural education evolved within the post-war discourse on the European city and the region. Prompted by a general dissatisfaction with universalistic modernist functionalist planning models and the imposition of a priori visions upon the city – which arguably disregarded human needs and neglected the existing historical, physical, and topographical factors of an area – he, together with other architects, theorists, and educators turned to the urban “real.” As a consequence of the modernist reductive functionalist approach, the city had become “illegible.” According to Nan Ellin in her review on post-war theories of urban design, this lack of legibility of post–World War II landscapes “incited a desire for the familiar and issued a call for designing ‘contextuality’ with regards to historical and local contexts.” This quest for contextuality was defined from different perspectives. European neo-traditionalists resorted to a pre-industrial time – thus avoiding change – whereas others made a strong call to “re-everything – rehabilitate, revitalise, restore, renew, redevelop, recycle, renaissance, and so forth.” Thus, the tool of reading was a method to “re” the illegible city and functioned as a corrective to the blindsiding of urban problems in architecture. De Carlo felt comfortable with the second perspective.

Though De Carlo showed a strong affinity with the Team X discourse and invited its members – such as Peter Smithson and Aldo van Eyck – as keynote speakers at ILAUD, the tool of reading can only be fully comprehended by looking at the discourses of the interlocutors who were not invited to the summer school. The Italian proponents on the new urban dimension were notably absent. As Micha Bandini noted in his reflection on architectural approaches to urban form, “reading” was a central attitude in the 1960s and ’70s debate on urban morphology. Proponents of the Venice School such as Aldo Rossi and Carlo Aymonio developed a typo-morphological reading in which they analysed the grammar of the city:

trying to find “the fundamental types of habitat: the street, the arcade, the square, the yard, the quarter, the colonnade the avenue, the boulevard, the centre the nucleus, the crown, the knot […] So that the city can be walked through. So that it becomes a text again. Clear. Legible.” (Delevoy, 17)
Fig. 6.6–6.7  Student works during the first Residential ILA&UD course in Urbino, illustrating the different implications of reading the city. Spreads from Giancarlo De Carlo, *International Laboratory of Architecture and Design, 1st Residential Course Urbino 1976* (Urbino: ILAUD & Università di Urbino, 1977).
Rather than imposing a model or lingua franca upon the city – as the modernists had done – these educators invited their students to read, decode, and interpret local types – or dialects as it were – and trace their historical formations. Yet, Giancarlo De Carlo carefully barred the work of these neo-nationalists from the ILAUD summer schools based on a semiotic discussion. Whereas for Rossi, types were timeless and could house different, consecutive functions, De Carlo instead believed that any change in function would also alter the type itself. De Carlo thus criticised Rossi’s readings of the city, for he too exclusively focused on the denotative level of signs – recognising their spatial existence – and ignored the intangible values or meanings attached to types. For De Carlo, the symbolic meaning thus had a continued existence over the functional meaning of a building.

Following from this semiotic argument, De Carlo held a different opinion on how these types should be made operational in design. Though Rossi and De Carlo both approached the city as a “living palimpsest” of past processes that could be traced or read, reading for De Carlo was not only an analytical tool but also a hermeneutical process at the basis of any design process at the basis of any design proposal. As Mark Blizard wrote:

In practice, reading – an attempt to decipher the traces and marks within the landscape – was active and reciprocal. It involved not only analytical inquiry, but also the formulation of tentative propositions. Each proposal was provisional in that it took the form of a question that was founded on the gathered insights. These, in turn, furthered the investigation. By its very nature as dialogic, this process unfolded differently with each project undertaken. Essentially, it was a research strategy that was also, and at the same time, an engine for forming and testing provisional design solutions.15

3. Reading as Direct Experience: Epistemological Claims

Next to being a research strategy and a directive for design, De Carlo’s reading tool also epitomised a 1970s disciplinary tension between architects and historians. We can, for instance, deduce this from De Carlo’s statements on reading as a design approach: “It is an extraordinary proposition that a study of the places we inhabit offers a much truer and fuller tale than all the words which we conventionally define as ‘history.’” And he continued: “There are events that are not recorded in the archives and yet are embedded in the architectural forms and testify to the lengthy layering process over centuries.” De Carlo – finding a theoretical bedrock in the writings of Christian Norberg-Schulz, who was a welcome guest speaker at the ILAUD residential courses – preferred the analysis of existing urban complexes through direct experience above the interpretation of maps or archival sources. Though he admitted that oral accounts
or written documents had their value in architecture and planning processes, for him, these sources were subjective and fixed in the past. Urban form, he argued, could be registered in the physical realm directly and could give clues as to how to design for future use.  

Echoed in De Carlo’s quotes is the nineteenth-century pedagogical concept of “lived” or “direct experience,” which, as Zeynep Çelik wrote, reveals a deep-rooted belief in the existence of “a nondiscursive, nonconceptual way of knowing that could nonetheless compete in its rigour with reason realised through language, concepts or logic.” Reading was an attempt to retrieve an “essence” that was believed to be “truer than history or words,” and thus involved a search for an architectural knowledge that was embedded in architectural and urban form. By promoting the tool of ‘reading,’ De Carlo made a claim on history from within design practice and indirectly demoted textual history. It can thus be argued that this experiential tool of reading enabled and represented a critical stance vis-à-vis the figure of the architectural historian and traditional “linear” historiography. Herewith, De Carlo joined postmodernist discourses that gave rise to such historical awareness in the 1970s and 1980s and influenced architectural education at large. Different architectural histories could now be sources of influence to the designing architect.

This disciplinary consciousness did not only play out in written texts but also in the tools which were used to understand urban form. In the works of De Carlo’s contemporaries such as Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo Rossi and Vittorio Gregotti, direct analyses of urban form through plans often displaced texts. As Andrew Leach wrote:

History is not removed from the spectrum of concerns for the fields of criticism aligned with planning, but rather treated as a present contextual condition, along lines similar to the treatment of history by modern architecture, but without the confusion introduced by the manufactured detachment of its writers. They interrogate the past as one dimension of a specific site of enquiry in present in order to propose an idea for the future from a thoroughly considered present. Urban typology and the conception of architectural form are thus drawn together in practice where analysis informs the plan.

For De Carlo, engaging with history through architecture was not without obligation. Underlying this focus on “direct experience” was a solid hope to develop architectural projects committed to matters concerning society at large. De Carlo, whose line of thought can be related to anarchist thinking of, for instance, Colin Ward, had stressed that history “does not concern itself with the past but with the present and it gives direction to the future.” In fact, the Italian scene was strongly marked by this question to which extent history had the potential to “be committed.” As Karla Keyvanian noted, the 1960s and ’70s architectural
discourse in Italy was strongly coloured by the left-wing ideas of Gramsci and Benedetto Croce, who demanded a history that was “alive” or aimed at social change. This idea permeated all De Carlo’s work, and especially his educational project in Urbino.

**Conclusion: The Predicaments and Dialectics of Reading**

De Carlo’s approach to reading can be interpreted as emblematic for what Tafuri called “operative history” in his 1968 work *Theories and History*. The risk of this approach is that the reading would deform or distort the past to achieve future goals. Tafuri, at all costs, would say that there is no ready-made solution for urban form to be found in its history. How, then, should we evaluate this tool of reading in an educational context?

**Architectural Knowledge Is Mediated by the Tools We Employ**

De Carlo’s understanding of traditional history is dubious. He denounced the positivistic faith in the truthfulness in archival documents, but replaced it with a faith in the truthfulness or “essence” of urban forms. De Carlo seemed to succumb to the temptation of replacing one way of gaining knowledge with another. The implied opposition between contemplative intellectual pursuit fixated on the past and design action oriented to the future is untenable in today’s discourse where architecture is instead seen as a hybrid practice able to overcome such contrived divides. As Çelik Alexander wrote, even tools based on the notion of direct experience are “accompanied by strict protocols that dictated another kind of order and syntax upon what was imagined as unmediated lived experience.” In other words, even direct experience is mediated by the tools we employ. There is thus a need to critically reassess the pedagogical tools in our studio-based education and to question their implied knowledge claims and embodied disciplinary tensions and divides.

**Reading Stimulates an Empathetic Design Approach**

Having zoomed in on the intellectual Italian context in which the tool of reading could emerge, reading can be considered a response to the alienation engendered by post-war urban environments. Staged in binary opposition to textual history, the tool and its underlying pedagogy of direct experience upheld a promise of a more democratic and participatory way of perceiving the built environment. De Carlo’s aim for ILAUD was not to develop clear-cut solutions for problem areas in the city of Urbino but to test tools for urban inquiry in order to evolve to a committed or empathetic architectural practice. It is this coupling of reading and empathy that can inspire educators in today’s studios.
In Giancarlo De Carlo’s speech, the relation between reading and architectural design remained unresolved. The tool of reading did not offer the students a toolkit for design – or for the “writing” of place. I would go as far as to say that the educational potential lies precisely in this conundrum between reading and writing. Almost simultaneous to the organisation of the first ILAUD summer schools, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Umberto described reading as a dialectical and interpretative process. The meaning of the text, they argued, could no longer be reduced to the author’s intentions but is plural. Or, as Barthes wrote in 1977:

The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus, it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination. [...] What he [the reader] perceives is multiple, irreducible, coming from a disconnected, heterogeneous variety of substances and perspectives: lights, colours, vegetation, heat, air, slender explosions of noises, scant cries of birds, children’s voices from over on the other side, passages, gestures, clothes of inhabitants near or far away. All these incidents are half-identifiable: they come from codes which are known but their combination is unique, founds the stroll in a difference repeatable only as difference.

The tool of reading enables an empathetic attitude in today’s design education. Empathy, as Sarah Robinson noted, is the capacity to

perceive the experience of others through the tissue of our own bodies – regardless of whether those others are persons, creatures, places or things – is a dynamic pattern of relationship that extends our awareness of the multi-layered emotional latency inhering in the situation. Empathy expands the domain of the personal to encompass the felt experience of the other.

As a pedagogical tool, reading thus stimulates a gentler and contextually responsive design. It can be applied as an exercise in recognising cultural and historical diversity and in identifying the intangible values of urban forms in the city’s text. There is no writing before reading in architectural practice.
Notes

1. A first version of this text was presented at the SPACE International Conference on 20 November 2020 and published in the e-proceedings: https://spacestudies.co.uk/product/ebook-e-proceedings-space-international-conferences-november-2020/. This chapter is a heavily revised and extended version. I wish to thank the editors of this book for their suggestions for improving this chapter.


6. Ibid., xii.

7. This was the focus in another paper: Elke Couchez, “Reading the City by Drawing. Tentative Design as an Educational Tool for Urban Regeneration in the 1977 ILAUD Summer Course,” *OASE 107 - The Drawing in Landscape Design and Urbanism*, edited by Bart Decroos, Frits Palmboom, and Bruno Notteboom (2020): 39–48. This paper showed the different and often contradictory implementations of this method of reading by drawing. Reading by drawing was by no means a self-contained analytical tool that covered all layers of complexity, but a deliberately tentative design approach that fed from the hinge between interpretation and projection.


13. Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism*, 23. The focus on defining a typology of the city was also central in the work of Kevin Lynch, who tried to improve the legibility of the city by making it imageable. The student works developed during the formative ILAUD years show a strong affiliation with this Lynchean approach. See Couchez, “Reading the City by Drawing.”


17. McKean and De Carlo, Layered Places, 48.
19. In his manifesto Complexity and Contradiction (1966), Robert Venturi for instance advocated for an architecture that was “more historically informed but not addressed to history per se.” This attitude was only one among a diversity of attitudes towards the past, as became clear during the Venice Biennale Presence of the Past of 1980. For further reading, see Léa-Catherine Szacka, “Historicism Versus Communication: The Basic Debate of the 1980 Biennale,” Architectural Design 81, no. 5 (1 September 2011): 98–105.
24. Çelik Alexander, Kinaesthetic Knowing, 22.

Bibliography


