Urban matters: city thresholds

Prof. Sara Bartumeus     ARCH 576 URM

“The threshold provides the key to the transition and connection between areas with divergent territorial claims and, as a place in its own right, it constitutes, essentially, the spatial condition for the meeting and dialogue between areas of different order. (...)The value of this concept is most explicit in the threshold ‘par excellence’, the entrance to a home. We are concerned here with the encounter and reconciliation between the street on the one hand and the private domain on the other”

-Herman Hertzbeberger in Lessons for Students in Architecture

Borders between architecture and the city, the city and the landscape are much more complex than a thin line, an edge, a change of nature and a division of property, personal interest or discipline field. Thus, the seminar suggests exploring the potential of urban thresholds and addresses how architecture better articulates within the city and at the city edge through the creation of intermediate spaces of hybrid conditions, activity and ownership.

The students will analyze specific case studies of international contemporary designs that explore the physical construction of the city and its urbanity through the creation of collective and public spaces. We will look at the most innovative architecture and urbanism policies in Europe which have started designing and regulating how building and city meet, the encounter between architecture and urban space through edgezone strategies. We will look to understand the city at a variety of scales: human to building, building to building, building to city, and city to landscape, zooming in and out to understand how these intersecting scales create urban life. When analyzing urban projects at the human scale, the edge and the ground floor articulation will be examined as a crucial aspect to enhance and improve a city’s urban life, as well as the open space between buildings.

Through deconstruction and abstraction of these case studies, students will develop an understanding of the strategies of urban architecture and urban design, synthesizing what they discover in graphic analyses as well as physical models. Class discussions and interactive murals will help to expose parallels between studies and draw new conclusions. Through readings, lectures and video interviews, the theoretical and design background of the seminar will introduce the thoughts and designs of architects that have reflectively and constructively cared about the threshold condition.

Our focus will begin with the early criticisms of the Modern Movement, in the critical thinking and the proposals of the Team X and its later influence. It relies on concepts such as: the Smithson’s ‘charged void’ and ‘street in the air’; Van Eyck’s ‘non-hierarchical buildings’ and in-between ‘playgrounds’; Hertzbeberger’s ‘thresholds’ and Alexander’s ‘pattern language’ and ‘semi-lattices’. It reflects on the individual freedom in a collective frame of Habraken’s flexible ‘supports’ inspired by Erskine’s ‘participatory design’ process. And, at a city scale, it addresses from the ‘material urbanity’ of Manuel de Solà-Morales’s ‘city corners’ to the ‘soft edges’ of Jan Ghel’s ‘cities for people’.

“...if the public spaces are the social image of the city, and the private plots are the privilege of the individual citizen, where contemporary urbanity may perhaps appear at its highest level is in what we define as ‘collective paces’, hybrid spaces that are simultaneously public and private, where the force of urbanity as a spatial mechanism to mediate social differences become tangible, material, and sometimes conflict-ridden.”


The goal of the seminar is to promote sensitivity to the urban dimensions of architecture and provide students with multidisciplinary design guidance that leads to the design of a more integrated physical environment.