Urban matters: thresholds between private and public spaces

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“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 Hertzberger in Lessons for Students in Architecture

Borders between architecture and the city 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 through the creation of intermediate spaces of hybrid conditions, activity and ownership.

Through specific case studies the students will graphically analyze international contemporary designs –residential and mixed-use urban projects– that explore the physical construction of the city and its urbanity through the creation of collective spaces, in-between the private and the public, buildings and open space in the city.

Regarding residential projects, the reflection will consider the urban dimension of housing, not looking at how dwellings are configured but at how they are grouped, examining experimentation in the aggregative criteria of residential units and patterns that, by making living in density attractive, benefit both environmental and social cohesion.

When analyzing urban projects, the edge and the ground floor articulation will be examine as a crucial aspect to enhance and improve a city’s urban life. We will also look at the most innovative architecture and urbanism policies in Europe, which being aware of the importance of the human scale in the city, have started designing and regulating the edge where building and city meet, the encounter between architecture and urban space through edgezone strategies. The seminar will also introduce, through readings, lectures and video interviews, the thoughts and designs of architects that have reflectively and constructively cared about the threshold condition between architecture and the city, about the spatial territoriality between the individual and the community, the person and the home, the people and the city.

The theoretical and design background of the studio’s reflection starts in the early criticisms to 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 ‘charge void’ and ‘street in the air’; Van Eyck’s ‘non-hierarchical buildings’ and in-between ‘playgrounds’; Hertzberger’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 Gehl’s ‘cities for people’.

The civil and architectural, urbanistic and morphological richness of a city is that of its common spaces, that of all the places where daily life is carried out, represented and remembered. And perhaps it is increasingly true that these spaces are neither public nor private, but both at once. Public spaces that have come to be used for particular purposes or private spaces that had taken on a community function(...) This is the task faced by the designers of public space in the modern planning of the city; creating these intermediate locations, neither public nor private but exactly the opposite, spaces that are not sterile, that are not just abandoned to advertising and profit but stimulating parts of the multiform urban fabric.”

Manuel de Solà-Morales in Public Space-Collective Space, Lotus Quaderni 23

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.