Urban matters: thresholds between dwellings and city

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, interest or discipline field. Thus, the seminar suggests exploring the potential of urban thresholds and addresses how architecture interacts with the city through the creation of intermediate spaces of different nature, activity and ownership, especially, the transitions between the most intimate and private spaces of housing and the most public open spaces of the city.

The challenging goal of contemporary architecture is to consider the urban dimension of housing in terms of redefining the relationship of closed and open spaces in a home. Incorporating shared outdoor space in the residential building fabric not only answers the personal need of “outdoor living spaces” and encourages interpersonal relationships, but can deeply impact both the configuration of the contemporary urban space and the home. In-habiting differently, thus, could mean articulating richer transitions between the domestic and the public through the collective to benefit both environmental and social cohesion. A creative and flexible design of those spaces in-between the street and the room, with different attributes in terms of scale, openness, exposure and privacy, would let the in-habitants appropriate the shared space by establishing these thresholds themselves. How can this “expansion of the threshold”, through permeability and filters, stimulate togetherness and still guaranty a certain architectural intimacy?

The seminar will rely on specific case studies to be analyzed and collected in a catalogue. By understanding and diagramming some of the latest European and American examples of residential architecture that innovate in designing intermediate spaces between the city and the home, and through discussion on assigned readings on those topics we will discuss their multiple approaches to architectural and urban design solutions. The reflection will go from architecture to urban design, examining simple innovation in dwelling typology to experimentation in the aggregative criteria of residential units and patterns that better relate to the context and favor more sustainable growth.

Some of the latest residential projects that talk about these intermediate and hybrid spaces overcome the concept of collective housing to become cities in the third dimension. Architects have recently been too object-directed and have tended to neglect these public -in-between- spaces. Do those approaches mean a significant shift? Or are we moving towards an interior urbanism?

Moving from the individual to the collective, in transition to the public, as a sustainable way of consumption of the territory and as a way of revitalizing the urban cores can help avoid the urban decline. Can designers offer a suburban quality of life in high-density conditions?

Has architecture lost its ability to create urban intensity, to create place? How can architecture better interact with the urban fabric to favor urbanity and enhance a place’s resilience? And, what is the role to be played by collective housing in the city, as a major compound of the urban fabric, as an urban matter?

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. Designing these liminal spaces at different scales, from different points of view, with borrowed and shared disciplinary tools is our challenge, the challenge of contemporary designers.