

DEBATE AS METHODOOLOGY TO LEARN ARCHITECTURAL CRITICS

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Abstract

Among the capabilities distributed by knowledge areas belonging to the studies of Architecture, the capability of being able to express architectural critics is a specific one assigned completely to the Composition area, both by the Ministry and by the different curricula of the some thirty schools of architecture existing in Spain. Learning how to make an architectural critic is a complex process based upon some previous knowledge (history of architecture, theory of architecture, etc.), initially to be acquired by students in the first academic year and to be trained in different subsequent subjects in order to reach an adequate level in this capability. In the School of Architecture of the Universitat Politècnica of València, the capability of making an architectural critic is specifically worked in the subject of Architectural Composition during the fourth year and Architectural Restoration in the fifth year, both belonging to the Department of Architectural Composition. The same capability is worked with a level even higher in the subjects of Theory and History of the Preservation and Intervention Criteria within the master in Preservation of the Architectural Heritage. This capability is developed through a methodology based upon debates that the students organize in the classroom. Reduced groups of students prepare a topic previously agreed with the professor to become a kind of “experts” of it with the help of bibliography, articles, documents, etc. They make a brief presentation generating questions among the audience of their fellow students. After this presentation, this audience must try to answer those proposed questions that often have not a clear or definitive answer, but many possible critical interpretations. These debates allow the students to express personal visions of a topic founded on previous acquired knowledge in these or other subjects, having to argue a critical position. Besides, this methodology encourages an intense and active participation of all the students of the classroom, not to mention the development of the capabilities of reflection, oral exposition and argumentation.

Keywords: Debate, Seminar, Critique of Architecture, Architectural Composition, Architectural Preservation, Degree Course, Master Course.

1 A BRIEF PREMISE ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PEDAGOGIC PROPOSAL

This pedagogic proposal is born of an integrated set of factors and it has some specific characteristics. First, the factors that have been considered for writing this proposal in a interrelated way are the institutional context (the UPV and the ETSAV) that defines the reality where we have to move; the academician context where the proposal is developed (the academic program and the situation of the subject inside them, the department, the colleagues of the subject, etc.); the professional context (the architect's profession in all its facets, the professional competence/ability assumed legally and the competence/ability of the architect in relation with the subject of the teaching project); and the disciplinary context (the matter and its development until present, its future horizons and its definition as a discipline). All these contexts set up the limits and the possibilities, as C. Marelo asserts [1]. They delimit, limit or allow us to develop some activities instead others. The pedagogic proposal has sense inside a context, or inside a series of real contexts that form the space where the most appropriate decisions are taken.

This proposal, nevertheless it considers the different contexts actively, is clearly focused on a personal view of the professors of the subjects. It is born through the experience in four interrelated levels: the education/formation strongly directed to the area of knowledge of the Architectural Composition in its double aspect, both heritage architecture and contemporary architecture; the profession that has been oriented actively to this professional area since 15 years, both level of studies and projects or

restoration works of monumental, traditional, vernacular, architecture etc.; the teaching that professors have imparted in the Composition Department on different subjects and curricula levels: the Degree subjects of Architectural Composition and Architectural Restoration, the master subjects of Theory and History of Preservation and Intervention Criteria, and the subjects of free choice of Restoration imparted to students of first and second academic year of the degree; and the research developed since 15 years as well. These experiences in the different personal areas have led to design a proposal justified on the need to incorporate different formative aspects: the vision of the subject through reflections on the historic and present theories that allow to identify several criteria base; an important synthesis between the theory and the practice based both on theoretical reflection and professional experience; the recognition of specific professional capabilities, critical and technical, in order to be able to reply in a effective way the challenge that the architect has nowadays; the capabilities of critique and reflection necessities to approach consciously a project and a building work, both new work and restoration work, without being slave of the science world and the more mercantilist techniques; the capabilities to consider each project and each building work as an occasion to go on learning and investigating.

In addition, in the current scene defined by continuous changes at all levels, our intention is to offer a proposal that consider the changeable scene, both in an academic level (see the reforms in relation with the Bologna Process, but also the future reforms planned in order to get a professional qualification through a master, etc.), and in a professional world that nowadays is in a deeply crisis and needs to rethink completely and find a new professional way for the architect. The changeable scene requires setting out flexible proposals that may adapt to the needs of the subjects, the society and the new students. Besides, the academic and curricula changes that are set out continually, forced us to set out the contents in a flexible, hierarchical, necessary and complementary way [2]. Therefore, the proposal is based on a teaching-learning philosophy. But it is not adopted as a fashion. We believe in the need of getting a lasting learning of the subject that it is necessary to form better professionals, more conscious and with the ability to face up to the continuous changes. The proposed contents could be reduced, extended and modified according to the teaching needs (type of students, level of studies, reduce of hours, etc.), but it would not be possible to lose the aim of the necessary learning to develop a profession from a point of view of the real professional abilities.

In this same changeable scene, students have to be able to adapt to continually different situations, and for this reason, the proposal tries to have a formative nature that allows them to develop their own vision about the subject with the exercise of reflection, debate and arguing. The formative nature of the proposal resides in the necessary orientation to the professional exercise (through the continuous references to real profession in the area, the analysis of projects and buildings or executed works, the exercise of developing a real project by the students, the visit of building works, etc.). It sets a clear base for the learning throughout the life (the continuous reference to the architecture as a world of constant innovation, learning through the building work and renovated reflection every time). At the same time, the proposal has an integral formative nature because it offers the chance to develop a series of common capabilities with other subjects (the life-long learning capability from the profession, the critique capability, the capability to argue and justify the taken decisions, etc.). It opens the visual field toward the professional world and the university world (integrating teaching and research). In addition, at the same time it tries to encourage cooperative learning (through works in group) and autonomous learning (helping the student to look for and to find his own way of construction of the subject), as well as constructive and active learning (building his own study of a building work and a project idea).

2 INVOLVED SUBJECTS AND METHODOLOGY OF TEACHING-LEARNING

2.1 The subject Composition and its competences

Composition is one of the subjects identified by the 2010 Curriculum of the School of Architecture of the Universitat Politècnica of València in the identification and distribution of competences related with the Architecture Degree. In this school the subject Composition coincides exactly with the Area of Knowledge of the Architectural Composition and with the homonymous Department. In turn, the matter Composition defined by the plan includes three kinds of subjects: History of Art and Architecture; Theory and Composition; and Restoration.

Nowadays, the professors of the Department of Architectural Composition impart teaching in four schools of the Universitat Politècnica of València: School of Architecture of Valencia; School of Civil

Engineering of Valencia, School of Designer Engineering of Valencia, and School of Industrial Engineering of Alcoy. In addition, they impart teaching in two official masters of UPV: the Master in Preservation of Architectural Heritage and the Master in Advance Architecture, Landscape, Urban and Design. In the department there are different teaching units according to their own regulations and their teaching coordination. Each teaching unit is formed by the responsible professor of the unit and by all the professors that give the subjects assigned to each unit. The Units of the Department of Architectural Composition are currently the following ones: Introduction to Architecture; History of Art; History of Architecture I; History of Architecture II; Theory of Architecture; Architectural Composition; Architectural Restoration; Aesthetics and History of Design; Aesthetics of Engineering.

Two curricula are currently imparted at the School of Architecture: the 2002 curriculum of Architect Qualification (only for some more years) and the 2010 curriculum of Architect Degree. Nowadays, in the 2002 curriculum the Department of Architectural Composition still imparts the following main and obligatory subjects: History of Architecture I, History of Architecture II, Theory of Architecture, Architectural Composition and Architectural Preservation. And the following optional and free choice subjects: Introduction to Composition, Design on existing buildings, Artistic-Architectural Heritage, Theory of Architecture II, History of Architecture III, Preservation. In the 2010 curriculum (The Bologna Plan) the Department of Architectural Composition currently imparts the following subjects: Introduction to Architecture, History of Art and History of Architecture I.

Finally, nowadays the Department of Architectural Composition imparts teaching in two masters, the Master in Preservation of Architectural Heritage and the Master in Advanced Architecture, Landscape, Urban Planning and Design. In the academic year 2011-2011, in the Master in Preservation of Architectural Heritage the Department of Architectural Composition imparts these main subjects: Theory and History of Preservation, Culture and History of Architecture, Intervention Criteria: from theory to practice, Sustainable Development and Heritage, World Heritage and Workshop of administration; and the optional subjects are: Valencian Gothic Architecture, Valencian Historic Residential Architecture: characters and preservation, Excavated Subterranean Architecture of the East of Spain, Preservation and Restoration of pre-Columbian Architecture, and Interpretation of Space: composition models. Whereas in the Master in Advanced Architecture, Landscape, Urban Planning and Design it imparts the subject of Theory and Criticism of Architecture and of the city; Theory and Criticism of Interior Design.

The competences defined by the 2010 curriculum for the Composition subject are the following ones: aptitude for exercising the architectural critique; aptitude for cataloguing the architectural heritage and planning its protection; suitable knowledge about the main theories of the form, the composition and the architectural types, suitable knowledge of the general History of Architecture; suitable knowledge of Western culture and its architectural traditions; suitable knowledge of Western culture and its technical, climatic, economic, social and ideological bases; suitable knowledge of the aesthetics, the theory and the history of fine arts and the applied arts; suitable knowledge of the vernacular architecture bases.

In connection with this text we are interested especially in the specific competence of the subject "aptitude to practice the architectural critique". It is a competence that is worked mainly by the Department of Architectural Composition, in different subjects, with different levels of deepening in relation with the level of the academic year in which the students are. Specifically, the professors who sign this text impart subjects at the last academic years and at the master: Architectural Composition in 4th academic year; Architectural Restoration in 5th academic year; Theory and History of Preservation and Intervention Criteria in the Master in Preservation of Architectural Heritage. In all these subjects the architectural critique is worked intensely and actively as a base of the thought about Architecture and Heritage as a cultural and referential base, not only to understand the architecture but to project and build it.

2.2 The learning methodology of "architectural critique"

The architectural criteria competence is defined by the White Book of the Degree in Architecture as an "aptitude or capability to analyze the architecture and the city typological and morphologically and to explain the formal and programmatic precedents of the project solutions". That competence is worked by the renowned subjects from different points of view and with different level: in the case of the subject Architectural Composition it is worked in order to acquire literally the "aptitude or capability to analyze the architecture and the city typological and morphologically and to explain the formal and programmatic precedents of the project solutions" specially according to the Modern and Contemporary Architecture. While its application to the architectural heritage and its restoration is

worked in the subjects of Architectural Restoration of the degree and of Theory and History of Preservation and Intervention Criteria. Therefore in a learning level, we can define a basic aim attached to that competence: the student has to analyze cases of modern and contemporary Architecture or cases of intervention in the Architectural Heritage according to the information found in the bibliography, in the press or in any other way of communication; to compare the analyzed case with similar ones; to structure a critique of a building work on the basis of the previous analysis; to argue reasons in favour and against of a specific opinion both on projects and new buildings as well as on the intervention on architectural heritage; to base and justify their own opinion.

The **methodology of teaching-learning** that we use in several subjects of both the degree and the master is based on a combination of different methods and techniques, so that it is a complex and wide methodology that chooses the most opportune method in every moment to reach the planned results and objectives in an effective way. In fact, the complexity of the contents and the competences that are worked in the subjects are achieved exclusively through a diversification of the methods and the techniques. In addition, they have an approach with a strict relation between theory and practice, and with the aim of achieving the necessary competences in order to answer to the professional requirements. The used techniques are: the participative classes in order to provide the students with a basic and structured information on a specific topic; seminars and debates that are practice classes in which students discuss and think about proposed topics; specific works that consist in a monographic work in group during the academic year or smaller different works with a practical approach and directly connected with the professional experience; activities in the class or brief exercises in relation with the practical work that represent a bridge between the participative classes and the development of the practical work sections, through the immediate application of the explained concepts in the chosen case for the practical work; tutorship during the class session of "supervised practice work at class", so the students have the opportunity to solve their doubts, both in class and in the professors' office; didactic visits in order to know something specific and interesting of the subject; complementary activities that are recommended to the students depending on the different opportunities along the year (conferences, seminars, workshop etc.)

The techniques that better increase the learning of architectural critique in all the levels, both the degree and the master, are undoubtedly the seminars and the debates that promote the capability of critical reading, critical summary of information, structuring of the information, research and construction of an argumentation, identification and argumentation of thesis, etc. In addition, they promote the generic capabilities to work in group, analysis and synthesis, argumentation and oral expression, and the improvisation and construction of arguments forthwith.

3 SEMINARS AND DEBATES

3.1 Seminars and debates of the subject Architectural Restoration

The seminars and debates organized in the subject Architectural Restoration try to work the competence of capability to think, to discuss, to criticize in the level of the theoretical contents of the subject. So those topics about the thought of different personalities and their theories have the principal aim of forming the students' own opinion of the discipline. In fact, the subject does not try to give a dogmatic vision of the discipline and. Through the different positions, the student will have a complex picture of ideas and with them he will have to make his own judgement. For this reason, it is important that students make a dialectical exercise of argumentation and defence of a few ideas that belong to some thinker of the history of the discipline.

3.1.1 *The seminars*

The seminar is a cooperative learning method that tries to involve the student actively in the teaching-learning process. In the specific case of the subject Architectural Restoration, along the academic year two seminars are carried out in order that students study, think and discuss about the topics of history and theory of restoration in a participative way. The two seminars are focused on the history of restoration with the analysis and debate of authors' texts like Viollet-le-Duc, Ruskin, Morris, Boito, Riegl, Lampérez, Torres Balbás, Giovannoni and Brandi and on the contemporary theories of architectural restoration with the analysis of recent authors' texts (Solá-Morales, González Moreno-Navarro, Bellini, Bezzi Bardeschi, Marconi, Torsello, Carbonara, etc.). The seminars have a first part of comprehension of a text, a second one of reflexion and critique of the same text in an individually level and a third one in group of debate and the summary of the ideas of the text and the arguments in favour and against of the exposed thesis. These seminars provide a reflexion about the contents of

the connected topics and the possibility to resolve doubts with the two practice professors and they are an important moment to promote the critique capability.

In both seminars every student has to choose a proposed text of the list before the day of the debate (all the texts are available for the students). During approximately one hour and half the student has to read critically the text and compile a form which has been written intentionally by the professors. The student is to summarize the three main ideas of the texts and three pairs of opposed arguments on the thesis exposed by the author. In class, the day of the seminar, groups are formed according to the authors (it is to say, for every author a group among 4 and 8 students will be formed) in order to put jointly the individually analysis and the completed forms and in order to reach a consensus among all on the main exposed ideas and the arguments in favour and against the thesis of the text. After the experts' meeting (with an approximate duration of 20 minutes), the spokesperson of each group will have to expose briefly the result of the meeting. When the exposition of the groups has finished (with an approximate duration of 30 minutes) a debate among all the groups about the arguments in favour and against of the thesis exposed by the different authors starts (with an approximate duration of 30 minutes). In the last part of the class (with an approximate duration of 10 minutes) the two professors and the students try to summarize the ideas exposed by the students and to structure them. The same day of the seminar every student delivers the form that has been written during the phase of autonomous work.

3.1.2 *The debates*

Moreover, in the subject of Architectural Restoration two or more debates are organized according to the available time and every year a current polemic topic without a concrete solution is set out so that the different contributions of the students are welcomed. Texts in favour and against of the intervention or the topic are provided in order to do the debate and, in this way, the students can achieve arguments for the formation of their opinion. During the debate, we as professors try not to intimidate them with our opinion or presence and we allow them to lead the discussion among them. We only take part in the debate to encourage the dialog among students with direct questions or, at most, to clarify some concept or to comment on the contribution of a specific student in a reasoned and aseptic way. While the student takes part of the debate, he feels that is the protagonist of his education and discovers the weight of his judgement, occasionally in a maturing process, in a debate with his classmate where the professor has a moderator role and eventually a commentator role. In the last years, we have organized debates about several Valencian topics in the subject of Architectural Restoration. The Valencian topics arouse the attention of the students because they are close and the buildings or the places can be visited in order to study the case directly in situ. The treated topics have been: Sagunto's Roman theatre, the Court of the Ambassador Vich's palace, the apse of Valencia's cathedral.

3.2 Debates of the subject Architectural Composition

In a parallel way with the theoretical classes of all the semester, debates are realized also in the Architectural Composition subject, in the ratio of a debate every week. The debates are suggested by the students the first day of class about burning questions of architectural composition: organic architecture against rationalist architecture; the architect conceived as an artist against the architect's work as a service for the society; traditional materials against modern materials, etc. This first day the dates of the debate are fixed, so the students in groups of 4 or 5 have enough time to prepare them. Every debate is developed by two groups of students that have to take opposite positions. It is a kind of didactic exercise in order to study a topic and to defend it that provides interesting educational fruits. Students appreciate this kind of exercise and their level of involvement and passion surprises every year.

When the students have chosen the topic of the debate agreed on with the professor among all the possible ones, they have to develop in group and in advance the position in favour or against with the help of the specific bibliography recommended by the professor. The day of the debate, the two positions are set out in a consecutive form by the corresponding group and the students have to argue their position. After the presentation (lasting approximately 15 minutes every group), the other students of the class have to take part in the debate (lasting approximately 15 minutes). Since the topics suggested are current debates without a fixed answer the students think freely and every opinion is welcomed in order to build a global vision.

3.3 Debates of the subject Theory and History of Preservation

In the Theory and History of Preservation subject of the Master in Preservation of Architectural Heritage, the debate is basic in order to encourage the level of capability of architectural critique that students have already obtained in the degree. In this case, every group of three students chooses a polemic topic in their own environment, in the city of Valencia or in any place of Spain, Europe or other places according to where they are from or their own interests. The chosen topic has to be a recently finished restoration, in progress or projected on the architectural heritage that has to be a polemic case or capable of debate, critique and discussion.

Previous to the presentation day, each group prepares deeply the case to discuss according to different aspects: the history of the building, the intervention criteria and technique, the fulfillment of the general criteria of intervention, aspects in favour and aspects in against. The sources of documentation are numerous, both books and journal articles, press articles or internet news. The day planned for the presentation the group has to set out publicly with the support of pictures and diagrams its arguments during 15 minutes. In the last part of the presentation the group has to propose questions and doubts to the rest of students that must answer and discuss opinions and arguments. The grading of the activity is based on the grading of the group during the presentation and on the capability to arouse and to encourage the debate with observations, questions, doubts, etc.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The seminars and debates constitute an important part of the methodology of teaching-learning of the named subjects that allow initiating, basing and developing the capability of the architectural criticism. In each level and in each area of discipline, the seminars and debates are set out in a different way in connection with the kind of topic that it is going to treat. Therefore, during more than ten years we have started using them, the seminars and debates have showed that they are teaching-learning techniques with a great efficiency. Moreover, they are very successful among the students, both those who present their dissertation and those attend to the exposition. They usually take part actively in the debate, and sometimes they even continue the discussion in the corridor after the class time has finished.

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