Dialectical urbanism: Tactical instruments in urban design education

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ABSTRACT

For the last decade, the Advanced Architectural Research Studio at the Department of Architecture, Middle East Technical University of Ankara, has concentrated its efforts on different cities in order to question their underlying problems, from social to physical; and to search for alternative urban design solutions. Relied on the premises of the theory of dialectical urbanism, two terms, “context” and “programme,” have been revisited in order to decipher the complexity of alternative urbanizations, in which architectural transformation processes have come under question using such themes as border, memory, accessibility or interface. In this respect, this article forms part of this scholarly investigation with which the theme, “hybrid” has been utilised to overcome the spatial shortcomings of a specific town in the Balkans – Pogradec. Combing insights from sociological and political realities of the context, it introduces a critique of the transmission model of design education, which renders studio works as passive abstract practices removed from social and cultural realities. This critical pedagogy not only challenges the limiting framework of contemporary architectural education but also calls back the creative political formations developed during the foundational years of the school.

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Introduction

For many decades, planners and architects have been addressing contemporary urban issues with the aim of not only offering better solutions to the increasing spatial crisis but also addressing social problems. In this endeavour, design education in particular plays a central role in putting innovative methods and models to use, and it is believed that contemporary conditions can only be properly understood and improved through such alternative processes of education. Such processes, however, when used in parallel with other disciplines and fields, bring about a momentum in the generation of new ideas and urban design proposals. A generation of architects and urban designers are now producing buildings, structures and forms by critically engaging with natural and man-made environments that re-interpretate design practice and design education (Kelbaugh & McCullough, 2008; Larice & Macdonald, 2006; Savage, 2005). However, alternative urban design methods, as counter-measures to recent practices, are still needed to criticise and make contemporary urban design education relevant in actual contexts.

By combining social and political realities of the given context, this research studio introduces a pedagogy that critically assesses the abstract models of design education, which detaches studio works as passive abstract practices from social and cultural realities. The complex relationships between urban environments and social conditions require more than pure methods of formal analyses and the abstract definitions of social theories. In this regard, the objectives of the studio are to prove that urban design education needs a broader viewpoint if it is to question urban space in relation to environmental problems. This dialectic between built environments and social contexts is believed to offer critical perspectives. Accordingly, this research challenges the existing studio education with three major premises: (1) the critique of abstract theories, (2) the reintroduction of the social responsibility of modernist implications, and (3) the recollection of the founding principles and the major mission of the Middle East Technical University (METU), Department of Architecture.

The critique of abstract theories refers to the recent conceptual approaches that have distanced design education from the realities of existing conditions. In this respect, studies of urban forms in relation to social contexts have long been criticised, for it is now believed that such complex relationships between the city and social conditions should be questioned neither in pure methods of spatial analyses nor in the abstract definitions of social theories alone (Günay, 2005, 2009). Rather, the effective use of urban design in the social realm requires a broader perspective that questions how urban space is produced in parallel with the processes of social relations (Inam, 2011). For this reason, one needs to question how and under what circumstances the production of urban space is exercised and how social relations are in tune with the means of space production (Lefebvre, 1991). Leaving culturalist interpretations and morphology analyses aside, this article critically
Dialectical urbanism: a critical perspective

In contemporary works, it has been suggested that there are differences in how urban design paradigms and social studies conceive meta-theories in assessing the city's relationship to its social environments (Ellin, 2006). Scholars of social studies are skeptical of the potentials of urban design, believing that cities have always been regulated by market relations (Gottdiener, 1997; Katznelson, 1994). Building their narrative into formal analyses, architects, as well as urban designers, construct rather deductive and reductionist discourses with only limited, if any, emphasis on critical theories (Inam, 2002, 2011). However, it is now believed that there is a possibility to explore how the relationship between the two fields should be, and recent works offer a wide range of urbanisms aimed at locating urban design within a larger context. In the search for a sustainable human habitat at the turn of the 21st Century, for instance, “integral urbanism” promotes a clear framework for the application of urban design in respect to economic, human or even scientific realities (Ellin, 2006). With its five concepts of hybridity, connectivity, porosity, authenticity, and vulnerability, however, it is rather regarded as a generic approach and thus has received considerable criticism. The “true urbanist approach” challenges such generic theorizations and instead proposes concrete patterns that are mainly derived from historical cases. True urbanism is regarded as an antidote to anti-urban tendencies in its search for timeless urban qualities that present themselves through a well-functioning public realm – squares and marketplaces, outdoor life, community spirit, human scale, mixed-use, compactness, distance and proximity, public transportation, pedestrian-based networks, street life, public art, etc. (Hinshaw, 2007). In the shadow of postmodern keywords such as historicism, however, true urbanism is regarded as a romantic tributary to traditional settlements and does not critically engage with recent social issues. By locating contemporary problems in a regional context, on the other hand, “landscape urbanism” manifests itself in relation to nature, suggesting that it is the landscape rather than architecture that is more capable of organising the city and enhancing the urban qualities (Walheim, 2006). Here, the role of the architect is minimal, leaving little room for architecture’s competence in social domains.

With unanswered questions remaining, therefore, recent endeavours not only promote innovative methods as such but also revisit some of the classical texts to explore the potentials of both theory and practice from a critical perspective. In his influential book The Production of Space, Lefebvre suggests that urban space has its own history but that specific history can only be understood as part of a wider history of society (1991). Perhaps the best analytical evidence of this theory can be found within the dialectic with which the city and its social structure are related. According to this approach, in interacting with the physical world, people not only transform it but also open up new possibilities for changing the social context (Burkett, 1999; Schmidt, 1965; Smith, 1984). Through this relational process, we also change ourselves, and this dialogue is fundamental to the understanding both of our interaction with urban environments and the instruments necessary for their transformation.

The difficulty in studying urban environments without consideration of social aspects is now understood, and, accordingly, there are a number of academic works that seem to bring together these two independent domains. Dialectical urbanism, in this respect, has recently identified four primary methods for its application: the study of the impact of the built environment and human activities on cities, the study of societal responses to those impacts and efforts to alleviate social problems, analyses of the relationship between cities and the ever-widening social complexities, and the investigation of design paradigms in regard to social issues (Ellin, 2006). Merrifield, for instance, questions the capacity of city dwellers to challenge the context of larger political and economic factors for enhancing the quality of everyday life (2002). In a similar fashion, Harvey’s perspective on contemporary social discourse favours a dialectical analysis of “globalization and the body” (Harvey, 2000). In each approach, in short, dialectical urbanism provides a scholarly basis for addressing contemporary urban and social problems from a critical perspective. It is also a vehicle for interdisciplinary research through which social theories and modes of urbanisation can now find a common ground.

In parallel with this theoretical framework, this study presents the works of a research group in the Department of Architecture at METU, which, over the last decade, has developed an experimental methodology in the design studio to search for alternative methods that will allow an understanding and will respond to the contemporary needs of urban design. Over the years, the research studio has studied major cities as Ankara, Budapest, Athens, Prague, Pogradeç, Aleppo, Nicosia, Berlin, Rotterdam and Vienna, investigating their complex territories in terms of their social and spatial aspects, and has challenged their complexity under a series of themes, such as nature, culture, border, memory, accessibility, interface and hybridity. We believe that the results of this method are worth recording because they provide a crossbreeding of spaces with displaced contexts, all processed through the thematic affluences and leading to the creation of assertive tools that are proficient in initiating new ideas and design proposals. Combining insights from sociological and political realities of those cities studied, these particular cases introduce a critique of the transmission model of design education, which renders studio works as passive abstract practices removed from social and cultural realities. This critical pedagogy not only challenges the limiting framework of contemporary architectural education but also calls back the creative political formations developed during the foundational years of the school. As far as the case Pogradeç is concerned, the three paradigmatic conceptions of the research studio, context, programme and theme, can best be reinterpreted within this scope, thus providing a conceptual framework for one another. Their autonomy should also be interpreted in their effect upon, and even determination by, formal and socio-cultural conditions in real cities.

The context

As part of its founding commitment to its international context, the METU Department of Architecture has long been conducting scholarly surveys and international research studies with the aim of developing an academic environment for the provision of
surveys of pragmatic issues. This commitment certainly includes further inquiries with which a new set of urban design methodologies can be reformulated, and academic surveys conducted either to describe the paradigmatic shift historically, or to critically understand the successive urban practices, have been a part of this commitment. The selection of Pogradec as the case study of the Advanced Architectural Research Studio in 2004 was put forward by a former student of the Faculty of Architecture, who at that time was a resident of the city; and the project was further encouraged by the local authorities in Albania as well as the Albanian students participating in the studio.

Albania has a unique history, having experienced kingship, socialist and post-socialist statehoods in the 20th century, and each political regime found a unique way of presenting itself through different modes of urbanism under a strictly regulated patronage. The final breaking point for the nation came with the White Revolution, which swept away all that had been exercised by the socialist state. The sudden transformation of the system from socialism to a market economy created a vacuum that was marked by stagnation and recession and resulted in nationwide instability. It is a known proposition that whenever restrictions on land are removed, property rights always revert back to their original owners (Günay, 2004), which was precisely what occurred across the entire nation. Pogradec was no exception, which of course created significant problems in the city's recent urbanisation. Of the many related issues, however, three are of central significance here and will be discussed further. First, the central and local governments lost the administrative capacity to sustain their authority and thus, to manage public land; second, the emerging middle class was eager to take the lion's share in the re-distribution of land and capital, taking advantage of private property rights as a tool for speculative development; and third, the conditions of the urban poor worsened drastically, giving them little hope or opportunity for decent survival, which in the end gave a way to a total “appropriation” of public land. As a result, environmental standards were drastically lowered due to the lack of local administrative incentives and adequate financial support.

Striking an additional blow, local administrations were not adequately equipped and thus, were unable to enact building regulations that would manage the almost spontaneously developing self-help urbanism. As explained by Günay, the recognition of private ownership manifested itself in certain issues: First, there was an enormous subdivision of land on the outskirts of the city; second, it was almost impossible to construct a new network of inner-city circulation; and third, there was unusual environmental development in the form of self-help urbanism (2004). Individual and sometimes group initiatives were taken spontaneously to transform the existing building stocks. All possible practices imaginable, particularly expansions and additions such as floors, overhangs, closed balconies and even additional rooms, were made to individual units while the gardens and courtyards between apartment blocks were transformed into land parcels and endowed with development rights. On a larger scale, the appropriation of public land, urban parks and streets, and even factories, parking lots and agricultural fields, became commonplace (Fig. 1). Thus, the excessive freedom, randomness and ad hoc building strategies took advantage of the existing conditions while developing a completely unique urbanism of its own (Koçi, 2005).

The programme (functional expansion)
Pogradec lost its significance as the port town of Lake Ohrid and immediately became a site of conflicting positions. Both the middle class and the urban poor used the once state-owned public lands as a tool for their own social improvement. For the middle class, these lands were synonymous with wealth; however, in the hands of ordinary people, it was basic survival that was sought. The excessive rights for appropriation, random spatiality and ad hoc design strategies brought about a sudden change to the city, and, accordingly, the goal of the Research Studio was not to question the strength of this given urban condition but rather to test its relevancy to over-ruling themes and to challenge its authority with a total displacement of the context – from Ankara to Pogradec, and back. The belief was that the “programme,” a common term in design discourse, might have been re-evaluated in this new location (Savas, 2004). In starting a site analysis or contextual research without the delimitations of a given programme, that is to say, “an architectural requirement list,” and initiating a decision-making process limited by the visual, physical, historical, environmental, social, economic, political and legal constraints of Pogradec and the identity of the designer rather than a single programme, different conceptualisations were tested. Additional familiar terms such as scale, mass, form and infrastructure were also adapted to accommodate the changing demands of Pogradec.

In this new context, a very unusual local rationale has been effective in spatial terms. The weak bond connecting form with function in architecture is strengthened by the immediate structural additions that are spontaneous responses to a variety of functional demands of daily life, no matter how temporary. For instance, in the dwelling units, expansions are made to accommodate various activities of family life (Fig. 2a and b), and the residents are not diffident in physically expressing their spatial needs on the forgotten two-dimensionality of façades. Protrusions are made in the form of free-standing rooms, and bathrooms and kitchens added to the external surfaces of existing blocks. Additionally, entrances, staircases, and corridors are transformed to accommodate playgrounds, laundry and storage areas, and the rationale behind the formation of new vertical and horizontal circulation patterns requires a thorough investigation. Moreover, it is the assigned functions of these expansions that transform the functions of the existing spaces. Facades gain a three-dimensionality that blurs the boundaries between the inside and the outside, the public and the private, the service and the served. It is under this new condition that this unexpected reunification of form and function catches the designer off guard.

The theme – hybrid
The word “hybrid,” as the theme of this experimental studio, was introduced to discuss its pre-eminence as the basis of any spatial organisation and expression. Regardless of the discrepancies in its definition and the ambiguities in its relation to space, the term hybrid refers to an interaction of two unlike genes resulting in a new breed that is different and unique in nature. At a deeper level, the term reveals that it is at once both the process and the end-product with which the boundaries of infinite programmes can now merge for the construction of interconnected structures, systems, relations, materials and representations. It is not an end in itself but a constantly evolving progression of simultaneous fragmentation, superimposition, de-formation, de-configuration, and so on.

The theme of “hybrid” is a conceptual instrument for Ellin, who suggests that, rather than isolated objects and separate functions, the hybrid brings urban practices and people together (2006). In parallel to this argument, this studio also believes that Pogradec is a good representation of what hybrid would achieve in alternative urban programming. Once dominated by a socialist regime and yet becoming a society of private ownership and a market economy in the 1990s, the town is now in a state of constant change. As a result, Pogradec has been offering in-between conditions since then, where such polarities as planned versus unplanned, rational versus irrational, logical versus illogical, projected versus spontaneous and...
traditional versus modern stand together and create their liminal conditions. Within this liminality, Pogradeç now presents an environment of appropriation (occupation – giving a new use-value), of new extensions of programming (conversion – cross-programming, trans-programming, dis-programming) and of new ways of unconventional construction (non-standard building and construction systems, techniques and materials). It is exactly at this point that the research studio introduced the three qualities of this type of programming (Borden, 2001). First, this new condition is not utterly subject to any speculative exploitation because it inherently provides an architecture of inclusiveness. Second, the urban space is now more than a commodity to be consumed, as its development is rather framed by in-between conditions. Third, the city’s new liminal condition provides a type of proactive urbanisation with limitless possibilities. It should be highlighted here that the studio work should not be perceived as an oppositional endeavour to neo-liberal urbanism but rather it is to enhance the capacity of contemporary conditions in the way to a relational process through which space-making and social contexts can be critically put into a dialogue.

**Studio works: urban tactics/projects**

What is required from the students is an urban programme that considers the assigned theme of *hybrid*. It is expected to be socially responsive and yet manipulative, contextual in nature and yet scaleless, historically relevant and yet universal. In accordance with the primary studies and findings of the fieldwork, the studio then intends to further what local authorities have already normalised and deepen the inquiry into a new mode of design procedure (Sargin, 2004; Sargin, 2008). As is clearly understood by the students, the suggested theme can only find its meaning in the material properties of urban space, particularly in its streets, squares and buildings, and obviously the self-help practices and the reflected urban tactics of *rerationalization, reprocess, reuse, replacement, reproduction* and *representation* are now exclusively more important than ever.

The word “tactic,” introduced by Gramsci, is of great significance in cultural theory because it also denotes “resistance” within a given urban context (1983). Unlike the radical tools of modernist urbanism, resistance as an outcome of urban tactics not only dictates an overall transformation but also favours bits-and-pieces, incremental change in relation to the context within which it operates. Therefore, what we call urban tactics, as tools of resistance, work for revolutionary as well as partial purposes against or within a given context, and thus these tactical instruments can be used for both “critical assessments” and “the processes of spatial production”. This condition is also significant in pedagogical terms because tactics define liminal roles for architects as resisting social subjects, purposefully kept minimal in the past decades. In the studio environment, as a result, none of these urban tactics were presented to the students in advance. Each approach emerged during the course of studio work. Some may seem contradictory; however, the students were rather encouraged to face such contradictions to explore all the possibilities for being proactive in their design approaches. Therefore, none of the suggested urban tactics were excluded. According to the students, these new urban tactics will not only improve the existing infrastructure, rehabilitate the abandoned industrial area, improve the living standards of the general public and distribute urban wealth equally but will also ultimately introduce alternative methods of urbanisation. The students believe that this creative methodology offers a good representation of how collective means of urban programming can generate alternative solutions. It is also these urban tactics in the new program that provide the most useful instruments, which can best be
clarified with a definition of each urban tactic that has been developed and sustained throughout the design process and exemplifying each with the related projects proposed by the students.

**Rerationalization**

For the students, if such attempts as reclaiming, personalising, sheltering, appropriating, reallocating and inserting are significant tools for transforming the urban environment, then so is the “rationale”. The rationale that is to regulate the entire urban structure, function and aesthetics is also subject to new challenges under the internal logic of a new design procedure. It is easier to suggest that the very logic of capitalism aims to neutralise both the process and the product, to perpetuate what market relations have already provided. Notwithstanding, the homogenising effect of existing urbanisation, according to the students, is now being disputed by non-standard structures (unconventional, un-institutional, and non-profitable building and construction systems), non-standard functions (mixed, superimposed, overlapped programmes and demands) and non-standard aesthetics (marginal or anti, representing a breakaway from the Western canons).

For instance, for the first student, who utilised the rerationalisation as an urban tactic, if the existing housing blocks were provided with the required infrastructure and additional performing spaces, they would cultivate the appropriate conditions for the accommodation of varying programmes and would generate spaces for cultural and social amenities (Fig. 3a and b). In a similar fashion, the urban design proposal of the second student suggests the superimposition of a new urban code onto the existing fabric to generate an ordered sense of public space. In either case, the proposed structures challenge orthodox building systems; insert a new function, which implicitly or explicitly strengthens the rules of urban programming; and propose a new aesthetic, which stands as an alternative to the dominant taste (Fig. 4a–d).

**Reprocess**

For the student who utilised the reprocess as her urban tactic, what is proposed is not an end-product but an active processing that is persistent and incessant in nature. Reprocessing is, in this case, particularly important. Unlike market relations, which tend to consider space as a commodity and thus reduce urbanisation to the status of consumption (regardless of any geographical location, culture and political system), the proposed urbanism through reprocessing tends to utilise urban space as a production line with which the act of programming is now reformulated, not in relation to any premeditated consumption, but rather a production process that reduces the determinative aspects of market relations. According to this student, the goal was to introduce generative programmatic elements between the industrial zone and the city in which urban design operates as an agent in support of productivity and provides for its continuity. The act of juxtaposition (for example, of the assembly lines and pedestrian circulation) is employed in the design process as a method of urbanisation. In regard to Pogradeč’s rerationale, the student believes at this point that reprocessing suggests a performance of its own, a process through which an intimate interaction, a mutual agreement between the two fractions of space-making, human labour (including an autonomous intelligence) on the one hand, and natural conditions (the physical aspects of any given surrounding) on the other, is possible. A new rationale and its application through a new process calls for an autonomy of labour that is capable of freeing itself from the constraints of capital, both socially and spatially, and is not always necessarily submissive. In short, reprocessing helps labour and nature become assigned into an innovative social context within which urban agriculture, food processing in factories and local labour merge into a new sustainable environment through cooperatives (Fig. 5a–d).

**Reuse**

This is another urban tactic that calls for an urban detour, or more precisely, a process of recycling, recovering and re-commissioning to give a second use-value to any artifact, including the urban space itself. The town of Pogradeč, in this sense, is a repository of “things,” almost a “curiosity cabinet” in which infinite items for space making are collected, classified and readied for use by its inhabitants. What was once intact and well preserved now awaits dismantling, and yet what is torn apart or displaced from its original condition/location is not to be left on its own as a sign of consumerism. Fixtures (from tables to sanitary equipment), building materials (from bricks to window frames), construction elements (from steel trusses to roof members), urban furniture (from cobblestones to benches) and landscape elements (from trees to open lawns) now have a new use-value, meeting its users’ expectations, fulfilling a need for betterment, enlargement, improvement, and so on.

With the fall of the Socialist Utopia, followed by a devastating civil war, Pogradeč, as was the case with all other towns in Albania,
is now subject to the urbanism of reuse in the creation of a new urbanism of its own. However, the reuse of materials and urban spaces can now enable its inhabitants to call upon a form of social control that challenges the direction in which the whole nation is channelled and that is, to cultivate qualities apart from those that have already been commodified by the culture of consumerism. In this respect, the student introduces the notion of “reuse” as an urban tactic and breeds new programmes within a generative network of arcades and bridges that connect the existing streets and transportation lines. The primary intention of this student is to provide a new network within which the existing stock can now be revisited for the introduction of a new urban programme that is utterly public in nature (Fig. 6).

Replacement

This is among the tactics most often used and involved the use of as many hostilities, dichotomies, contradictions and conditions as interchangeably as possible to amplify the level of urban complexity. Replacement as an urban tactic enables self-taught designers/constructors and ordinary citizens alike to blend the two forces of any binaries, such as public and private, open and closed, inclusive and exclusive, ephemeral and permanent, steady and unstable and create infinite in-betweeness in which crossbreeds, liminals, and others can generate their urban niches. Through replacement, the urban space can now call upon multiple interactions with diverse elements, resulting in unexpected programmes, events, functions, structures, forms and aesthetics, all of which come together in their fabrication. For the student who studied replacement, the boundaries of infinite programmes and spaces materialised to form a unified system and a new urbanisation for the city. The proposed linear programmatic structure aims to create a hybrid urban space for domestic activities, social events and cultural production (Fig. 7a and b). The student’s proposal is not merely to claim urban leftovers (such as side yards and backyards abandoned by their former owners), personalising the streets (such as dead ends) and sheltering the courtyards (now being used as private spaces) but also appropriating all public buildings (such as factories, garages), re-allocating mass-housing stocks for further constructions (such as adding new flats to terraces) and inserting niches, kiosks and rooms into the city’s public spaces.

Reproduction

Much of the urbanisation of Pogradeç is not original. From one end to another, the town reproduces itself in a pattern that is common practice in Pogradeç’s daily life. In this respect, the student that utilised reproduction proposes a unique pattern that constantly replicates itself to create an urban fabric. By generating a method of expansion and by regulating the expanding infrastructure, this project appreciates the value of spontaneity in the invasion and occupation of the industrial zone (Fig. 8a–d). It is an indispensable result of simulation that both the original and the replica become one, disregarding issues of autonomy, authenticity and legitimacy. The one copies the other, as it was copied before, and the result is a town of infinite imitations and duplications, or more precisely, reproductions. For this student, the primary question is, “Is reproduction of no value?” For the proposed alternative urbanism the contrary can be said to be true, as reproduction seems to be the most assertive tool for the creation of alternative spaces for the majority where the boundaries of the spaces of capital (needing both an international taste and local flavour for individuals) can be challenged and channelled into a new collective urban culture that is creative and innovative for all.
Fig. 5. (a–d): Urban Tactic 2: reprocess. In Between: Industry as an Operational Tool (Özlem Mutlu).

Fig. 6. Urban Tactic 3: re-use. Bridges and Arcades Revisited (Öznur Peker).
Representation

Principally, representation is not about how and to what extent things are presented but is rather about deciphering the overruling canons of the orthodox expectations that are embedded in the vocabulary of each decision and decoding the intricate relations between what is observed and what is unseen. According to the students, through representation, the town of Pogradez is now subject to a constant simulation of its own that is itself a container of both the spaces of old and new urbanism all at once. However, this constant process of representation underemphasises the significance of the stylistic and formalistic needs, making its own iconographic vocabulary, operational, communicative and unrestrained among its inhabitants. Representation is not about forms and styles but is rather an assertive instrument that can be used interactively to resist the overwhelming pressures of the imaginary world of existing urbanism.

Accordingly, the student who studied the term representation defies what is presented to him. For him, aesthetics is also an important issue and should be considered as one major parameter in urban design procedures. New urban aesthetics should be proposed in which people can live, produce and trade within the same place, where different forms of social relations are expected to transpire and in return, to redefine the established conceptions. The superimposition of residential areas on the workspaces initiates the hybrid, which in turn allows an unorthodox condition of its own taste (Fig. 9).

In respect to the abovementioned premises, in short, these urban tactics overlap in many cases or seem to contradict as they impose diverse propositions. In some cases, the proposed programs fall under the category of modernist urbanism’s implications for “total transformation” because they propose a new logic of urbanism, bio-centric or production-based design principles (e.g., rerationale, reuse and reprocess) or sometimes call for rather incremental changes through appropriation, non-autonomous architecture or communicative design methods (e.g., replacement, reproduction and representation). Whatever their explicit intentions are, “total transformation” or “partial change,” they propose unique solutions specific to the given context, and they either challenge the social conditions or are inclined to operate within those conditions, which bring forth a sometimes contradictory and yet dialectic inquiry for alternative urban design proposals. All these proposals can be regarded as concrete cases to a certain degree as they challenge the abstraction of design methodologies that separate education and practice from existing conditions. However, the relationship between tactics and proposals remains unresolved because that
Fig. 8. (a–d): Urban Tactic 6: reproduction. Everyday Urbanism: A Modular Pre-cast Atelier (Alper Öden).

Fig. 9. Urban Tactic 7: representation. Overlapping Pure Conditions: Hybrid Housing (Devrim Çimen).
relationship is not an end-product but a process through which a dialectical method can be used to explore its full complexity. Therefore, the studio assignment should be regarded as a “process design” as well to bring tactics and urban design examples as mutually confirming elements of an unceasing design process.

Epilogue: dialectical urbanism as a pedagogical method

Today, under the full enforcement of neo-liberal policies since the 1980s, not only has laissez-faire become the governing mode of the political-economy, but the overall effect of liberalism has drastically altered many of the orthodoxies from welfare states to a culture of modernity – including the socialist programmes that had long been established and ideologically affective in the Balkans throughout the 20th century. The new era, in fact, has been regarded as the final accord of post-industrial capitalism, through which the role of central agencies were minimised, if not eradicated; social projects for the collective well-being have been crippled; and the modernity project, with all of its implications, specifically in urbanism, gave way to fragmented solutions. In spatial terms, the last 20 years have witnessed a relentless restructuring process on all scales: the term “space,” in tune with neo-liberalism’s homogenising nature, was redefined; cities were enforced to take part and play hard in their own sustenance; and urbanism became one of the most important agents of all political maneuvers to fix capital spatially. Along with the side effects of this new spatiality, such as time-space compression among geographies and the generic programmes in urban environments, it was the cities that suffered the most (Harvey, 2006).

The Balkans, in particular, enjoyed a great turnover that enhanced their position as a space of accumulation and distribution vis-à-vis landed and finance capital; yet, it also nurtured a great deal of social inequalities and paradoxes: wealth and poverty, glamorous corporate buildings and eradicated city centres, and luxurious suburbs and slums all went hand-in-hand. Today urban settlements exist that contain a diversity of dualities that are antagonistic in nature and reflected spatially. Within that specific context, this research studio attempts to challenge the abovementioned problem under three significant premises: First, it is designed to critique abstract theories in urban design education to advance relational methodologies that are relevant in actual contexts; second, it aims to maintain the founding principles and the primary mission of the METU, Department of Architecture through design studios; and, finally, it attempts to reintroduce the issue of social responsibility, which was originally embedded in Modernist implications.

Combining insights from the social and political realities of the given context, the research studio introduces a pedagogy that critically assess the abstract models of design education, which render studio works as passive detached practices that are removed from social and cultural realities. Abstraction distances design education from the materials of existing conditions. However, the complex relationships between urban environments and social conditions require more than just pure methods of formal analyses and abstract definitions of social theories. In this regard, the way in which studio objectives are presented proves that urban design education needs a broader viewpoint to question decisively how urban space should be designed in relation to the pervasive environmental problems. This dialectic between built environments and social contexts is believed to offer critical and challenging perspectives.

This critical pedagogy not only challenges the limiting framework of contemporary urban design education but also refers back to the creative political formations developed during the foundational years of the school. Since its establishment in the early 1950s, design education at METU Department of Architecture has been primarily concerned with the real problems of urban formations and the rapid transformations of cities in developing nations. It is partially due to its founding principles that urban design has also been regarded as part of its general curricula since then. As the title of the university suggests, Middle East Technical University was established by the United Nations as a research institution not only for Turkey but also for the entire region, and the Department of Architecture has become a secular environment for academic and applied research in this regard. The primary mission of the Department is stated as training professionals and scholars required for urbanism, housing, construction and planning. In particular, the fourth and fifth year design studios have been conducted within an interdisciplinary framework to deal with the complexities of urban design issues. Each studio assignment is interpreted as a research project, which at the end would either be applied in real environments or documented as a reference for further urban developments in the area. Developing new settlements, maintaining the sustainability of man-made and natural values, searching for possibilities in post-war zones, squatter settlements or deserted industrial landscapes, creating healthy environments for people in need and learning from traditions and conventions were the major fields of interest for the studio studies up until the mid-1980s.

This studio is a genuine attempt to revert back to what has long been forgotten in the Department since its establishment. Revisiting that mission from 2000 onward, the studio has been conducted as an antidote to the invasive problems of design, mostly triggered by abstract formal analyses that may be either conventional or parametric. The “urban tactics” introduced in Pogradeç were called out for this purpose and applied to a new context. These tactics were interpreted as experimental instruments for the development of alternative design programs to be integrated with existing urban realities. Writing an urban program for an existing urban environment not only called for the re-interpretation of a “functional requirement list” as a studio assignment but also motivated the development of a larger conceptual framework in which material realities (nature, infrastructure or built environment, etc.) were to blend with social expectations (political implications, planning rules, or user profiles, etc.). Rather than designing an end product, the students were asked to introduce tactical instruments with which each actual intervention into the built environment would be tested under the realities of social and cultural conditions.

The prefix “re” was used not to recall an already passé criticism of modernist aftermaths (postmodernism, deconstruction, etc.) but to unveil existing values that would remain invisible otherwise. Based on contemporary urbanism and urban design literature, it was discovered during the studio discussions that these seemingly independent binaries – rerationale, reprocess, reuse, replacement, reproduction and representation – were loaded with environmental concerns. The target tactics of the students were not so much aimed at re-cycling formal or stylistic concerns but rather provoking a re-appreciation of timeless values in urban architecture. The same prefix also served another practical–theoretical purpose, directly supporting hybrid conditions and providing a complete set of instruments for spatial organisation and expression (Ellin, 2006). In their relation to urban space, these terms refer to interactions of two unlike urban conditions that were to breed an alternative understanding in urban design, one that was alternative and yet productive in nature. Neither rationale nor irrational, both product and process, incorporating traditional and new, supporting the real and its representation, the hybrid conditions were created to reveal much more – that Pogradeç was an urban environment in which the boundaries of infinite programmes, spaces, and spheres could merge in the construction of relational structures, systems, materials, forms and representations. As a result, the hybrid provided alternatives for further design processes, and what the
students achieved in the end was a constantly evolving instrument for the targeted city’s future development.

During the formation years of the Department of Architecture, particularly after the 1960s, the relationship between “form” and “function” in the design process was the subject of such a broad range of studies that today, it is no longer possible to assign a design project without problematising the “functionality” of “programme” (Beslioglu & Savas, in press), which is related to a known procedure, within which the form of a building was to be derived from the function that it was intended to fulfill. The method of listing the “functional requirements” of a building complex and matching each item on the list with preset spatial dimensions is still considered as a valid starting point in a design procedure. Not only project assignments in design studios but also competitions have been organised with such conjectures. The nature of a project assignment is the major challenge for the candour of this relationship, which otherwise could not allow different interpretations.

The weakness of function in the determination of the final form has been the subject of design discourse for at least half of a century, as epitomised by Anderson:

My argument will be that “functionalism” is a weak concept, inadequate for the characterisation or analysis of any architecture. In its recurrent use as the purportedly defining principle of modern architecture, functionalism has dulled our understanding of both the theories and practice of modern architecture (1987, p.19).

Interpreted as an “error” by Anderson and incorporated within “a richer notion of fiction – that of storytelling.” function is a fiction. Yet, as exemplified in Pogrđeč, the end result of a frozen time span is a combination of forms that has become justifiable due to the change of function, which can be evaluated as a re-discovery of the almost one-to-one relationship between form and function and, in better terms, is the unconscious re-appreciation of “form follows function”. The context was, by its very nature, shaped by an extreme functionalism, yet it was more than ever incapable of determining the final form and indeed was incapable of producing space. It was within this context that the programme became an issue. The highly dynamic, unstable and unpredictable context forced the programme to re-evaluate its authority.

This continuous re-programming can be regarded as a paradigmatic background where once again, the unconscious critique of Modern urbanism can be found. It was in fact Modernism that once established the general ideology of architectural education at METU. Recalling the foundational principles of the school served two purposes: reminding architectural education of its social and political responsibilities and reminding its graduates of their obligations in policy-making organizations. Hence, it should not be conceived as a mere coincidence that the graduates of 2004 are now taking active positions in Albanian planning organizations and have become insightful technocrats.

References


