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IN PURSUE OF IMPROVEMENT

The 'loaded nooks' of SVET VMES architectural practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the top down strategical documents and financial mechanisms that daily influence and sometimes compromise the activity of our design practice SVET VMES from Ljubljana, Slovenia. Through interviews with our clients and users this paper investigates our bottom up method of “continuous loading” into the sore, left over, in-between space in educational buildings to test its disturbance on local and national level in order to better understand why it works at certain schools and not on others, identifying mechanism that support our current social reality. “Loaded nooks” of our practice, as potential places of delight (D places), are introduced as one of the missing components of our rigid and outdated legislation, which interprets schools as a sum of A, B and C spaces, constituting cost efficient, durable and sustainable machines.

INTRODUCTION

Summer is by far the most productive time for our architectural practice and all the people who daily work in it. We are “in season”, from the end of May until mid-September, trying to facilitate an abundance of small projects in various schools or student homes across the country. Ideally everything will get built before September 1st. Sometimes I feel we are like doctors, part of a larger social infrastructure, constantly “on call”, trying to improve and repair the existing, decaying educational infrastructure, from the inside out, part by part, nook by nook, slowly and patiently. When thinking about our practice and our work, Nabeel Hamdi’s book *Small Change* comes to mind where he argues that a: *“...good development practice facilitates emergence; it builds on what’ve got and with it goes to scale. It follows, therefore, that in order to do something big - to think globally and act globally - one starts with something small and one starts where it counts. Practice, then, is about making the ordinary special and the special more widely accessible - expanding the boundaries of understanding and possibility with vision and common sense. It is about getting it right for now and at the same time being tactical and strategic about later”* (Hamdi 2004, p. 19-20).

I believe this is in general what we are trying to do in our architecture studio. We observe, diagnose, act, (hopefully) improve and provide support for existing schools which have an abundance of neglected, left over, in-between spaces. We are trying to rethink the value and perception of these forgotten areas and exploit their design potential. By healing the “left-overs” and transforming them into *“loaded nooks”* (see figure 1), which is something *“right for now”*, we want to physically improve the existing spatial condition of a certain school building and at the same time, build numerous case studies, *“which is about being tactical and strategic about later”*, that would help us challenge, act upon and improve the existing social reality and rigid typology of educational architecture in Slovenia that is governed by the strict, non-flexible normative and legislation for designing school buildings.



Figure 1: Loaded nook - School Landscape: Renovation of the unused secondary school entry, Ledina Grammar School, Ljubljana, Slovenia (SVET VMES, 2013), Photo: SVET VMES Archive and Matevž Paternoster.

With this paper I aim to:

- reflect on my previous findings presented at the CA2RE conference in Ghent,
- explore the top down mechanisms that have an influence on the architectural production of our practice,
- understand why certain projects are continuously interrupted or stopped at the level of scheme design,
- test the possible disturbance of our practice through interviews with our clients and users, to better understand how they perceive our work within the educational system in which they work.

THE MISSING COMPONENT

At CA2RE Conference in Ghent in April 2017, I argued that rigid formulas provided by Slovene Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (MIZŠ), where public school buildings are understood as a sum of primary “A spaces” for teaching (53 %), secondary “B spaces” for supporting activities (25%) and tertiary “C spaces” for connecting purposes (22%), suffocate design experimentation and promote architecture built according to “existenzminimum”. I introduced a notion of *delight* (with contemporary synonyms like: pleasure, happiness, joy, thrill, captivation, excitement, etc.) as an intriguing translation of Vitruvius’ *venustas - beauty*, first used by Sir Henry Wotton, in his Elements of Architecture in 1624. *Delight* has been, according to cybernetician and design researcher prof. Ranulph Glanville, from the three famous Vitruvius’ notions, the most downplayed and often left out of scientific research due to its non quantifiable nature. He argues that especially in Functionalism, delight was perceived as a sum of *firmitas* and *utilitas*, where: “...if you dealt properly with functional requirements, the appropriate form of the designed object would arise automatically, and would bring delight”(Glanville 2009, p. 177). In my opinion this interpretation (stripped down and exploited to the utmost minimum) is still present in our latest Instructions for Building Primary School Buildings from 2007 that are just a brief update from the 1999 version and the latter is an update from the last valid legislation from 1968! There is no room for *delight*.

I believe the “*loaded nooks*” of our practice, which I define as a strategically positioned comfortable niches or nests, loaded with new, evocative and intriguing form, show a positive example of *delight* or *places of delight* in Slovene schools, where they, if located in neglected exterior or interior in-between space, instigate various events and appropriations to happen, encourage interaction and negotiation among pupils and above all, encour-

age spatial sensitivity among young people. In the attempt to make our work explicit to the MIZŠ who operates with the ABC schedules to define the program brief and to estimate the size and the cost of new educational buildings, I introduced the “loaded nooks” within “their operative language” as the 4th (missing) component (D) in their existing formula $A+B+C$. The “loaded nooks” become “D places” or “places of delight” in a new formula: $A+B+(C-D) \times D$. Here the sore left over, in-between space (C) is being augmented with healthy “loaded nooks” ($\times D$ places) that slowly, one loaded nook after another, as a web or a society, form a new kind of interstitial typology - “the loaded in-between” that is triggering new “in-between behaviors” among students and staff members, challenging their daily routines and even pedagogical patterns. Therefore, our “continuous loading act” is not merely a replacement of one space with another, but an amplification, a precisely positioned intervention whose influence area is wider than the area in which it is located (therefore $\times D$ and not $+D$). This method/ideology above all promotes an improvement of existing, “sick” buildings and not necessarily the creation of new ones or the countless enlargements of components A, B or C. With this formula I do not wish to downplay or shrink the complexity of our work to merely “D places” because I firmly believe that we should be encouraging completely new legislation that would allow architects to experiment with various building typologies where A, B, C and D spaces somehow disappear or become fluid enough to intersect each other and where rooms rather become learning landscapes with polycentric solutions or any other kind of other appropriate typologies that go beyond the existing spatial hierarchy of A, B, C as *first, second and third space*. This implemented formula above all serves well as a communication tool when talking to the MIZŠ because it makes our method easy to understand and can provide an intermediate solution before completely changing the existing legislation which can take years to implement. At the same time, the method of “continuous loading” is useful for numerous existing educational buildings, that were built according to ABC program brief and must adjust to new, more holistic teaching methods and slowly implement their learning environments with rather small economy of means.

“You introduced this kind of a ‘D’ that runs through the normative and destabilizes them.” (Murray Fraser, CA2RE Conference, Ghent, 2017)

D for delight, D for destabilization, D for disturbance. I would like to believe that our practice disturbs! That it destabilizes the existing social reality, rigid rules and regulations that govern every aspect of educational architecture. That our practice matters. But how much of that is true? Can our practice with its direct, bottom up approach - “the continuous loading act” and with its numerous “loaded nooks” really disturb the top down political and financial

mechanisms? I used the time between April and September 2017 CA2RE Conference to test the possible disturbance of our practice and to get more familiar with the top down mechanisms that go beyond the building normative and legislation. I explored some of the national or EU research projects, strategies and surveys. I conducted interviews with our clients, namely the school principals of successful Slovene grammar and elementary schools that exposed the specific financial politics and their personal leading and budget saving strategies. My plan now is to finalize the interviews with our users, namely the pupils and staff members of the three grammar schools, where our numerous “loaded nooks” are located and with Department for Protection of Cultural Heritage (ZVKD) and MIZŠ in the beginning of October and November 2017. For now, the excerpts below, which are extracted from 6 groups of documents, namely:

- The Architectural Politics of Republic of Slovenia - “Architecture for the people”,
- ESS Fund:” Development and implementation of innovative learning environments and flexible forms of learning to raise general competencies”,
- Targeted Research Program (CRP): “Comprehensive and interdisciplinary assessment of the quality of public schools and kindergartens in Slovenia,
- User’s Voice Survey,
- MoFAS,
- Interviews with our clients (excerpts),

represent the findings of this paper. I will introduce each one of them in the chapter below. I knew at the start of this investigation that there will be no final answer by September CA2RE Conference but at least it brought me closer to the overall understanding of top down strategies, that are somehow partially responsible for a continuous interruption of some of our projects, that seem to have certain things in common, the type of a client or institution. These projects stop at the level of scheme design - yellow bubbles on the case study map (see figure 2). Why is that so?

architecture by re-evaluating the existing rules, regulations and normative for designing and renovating school buildings, thoughtfully distribute available financial resources, execute transparent and high quality public procurement for architectural and engineering services and above all promote spatial education early on, starting with school curriculum, to raise the general spatial literacy of our nation.

ESS FUND: “DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF INNOVATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND FLEXIBLE FORMS OF LEARNING TO RAISE GENERAL COMPETENCIES”

This is a project initiated through tender of European Social Fund (ESS) and the MIZŠ at the end of 2016. Here approximately 80% of the funds came from the EU and the other 20% from our national financial resources. The overall value of the program is approx. 12, 5 million Euro and its aim and goal is to: *“update and renew learning environments, implement new approaches and pedagogical practices with the inclusion of new technologies, that will instigate and raise general competences of children, pupils, students in kindergartens, primary and grammar schools, especially in the area of reading, science, mathematics and digital literacy in order to develop critical thinking, problem solving, articulation and raise cultural awareness” (EU Skladi 2016)*. Five projects received the “ESS funds” and none of them covered innovative learning environments from the point of architecture. There was no program that would inclusively connect architecture and pedagogy. I was struck by the amount of money that goes into pedagogical research and saddened by the fact how little goes into research about *“innovative spatial learning environments”* - they are in the end promoted and known as the *“third educator”*.

“TARGETED RESEARCH PROGRAM (CRP): “COMPREHENSIVE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT OF THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND KINDERGARTENS IN SLOVENIA”

This is a national program, prepared for tender by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS) and the MIZŠ, funded with national financial resources, approx. 60.000 Euro. University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Architecture partnered up with University of Primorska, Koper Pedagogical Faculty in a three-year project that will constitute: *“the basis for the new guidelines, developed from the interdisciplinary point of view, for the qualitative design of school buildings and spaces for the upbringing and education of children” (Faculty of Architecture Ljubljana 2016)*. This document will be crucial for our future legislation and normative for designing pre-primary and primary institutions. What

is worrying is the amount of money spent on pedagogical research (program No. 2) in comparison to the money spent on architectural research assessing our existing educational architecture (program No. 3). Nine researchers (with the additional help of students), will spend three years working on valorisation of existing educational architecture, with the funds of 60.000 Euro! Unfortunately, the analysis includes merely the assessment of public elementary schools and kindergartens (high schools excluded) within Slovenia, therefore we are in danger of “falling in for the same trap”, like the chain of repeating program patterns and typologies in 1968 - 1999 - 2007 Instructions for Building Elementary Schools. The 2019 analysis will tell us what is the partial state of educational architecture in Slovenia. Since there will be no comparing with “the world out there”, these new guidelines might (yet again) not have the capacity to thoroughly revolutionize the way regulations for designing and building educational architecture are written. The final results are expected by the end of 2019.

THE USER'S VOICE OF THE PRE-PRIMARY INSTITUTIONS AND SCHOOLS” (BARŠI AND GOLUBIČ 2009)

In 2009, the MIZŠ conducted a survey about 5 pre-primary institutions, 11 primary schools and 7 secondary schools, where they have interviewed 444 users to get feedback on: building location, aesthetic aspects, functionality and their well-being within the building space. After the interviews with the users, MIZŠ continued with the architects who could describe their possible cooperation difficulties with the contracting authority or the contractors and talk about their personal view on the use of space after seeing the completion of their buildings and propose their initiatives for the future. Below are some of the chosen excerpts:

- *“The representative of the ministry insisted unnecessarily on particular normative solutions.”*
- *“Schools are being turned into barracks.”*
- *“The design of pre-primary institutions and schools should be overwhelmed with heterogeneity, variety, unconventionality, and inventiveness - dependent on creativity nurturing” (Barši and Golubič 2009, p. 15-16, 22).*

Especially the last comment resonates *delight - for the user, client and the architect (Glanville 2009)*. Unfortunately, not much has changed in the last eight years when it comes to setting up new benchmarks. I find it worrying, that the guidelines and benchmarks for school design are, in majority, written by primary and high school pedagogues and various experts, whereas the majority

of participating architects are simultaneously architecture experts from practice and representatives of the client - the MIZŠ, Directorate for Investments (their employer). This leads to a conflict of interest as the same person who is involved in the creation of guidelines is also the client.

“MOFAS” MODERNISATION OF FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

This new financial system was implemented in all high schools and faculties in 2013, whose founder is the State. With MoFAS, all grammar schools and faculties are being funded by the number of students attending their program. This financial mechanism is quite different from the pre-primary and primary institutions which are founded by the Municipality. Therefore, the situation and educational program is different in every school as there are 212 municipalities in Slovenia and all of them with different specific financial and infrastructural capacities. With MoFAS, not much has changed for schools, that get enough pupils, usually the ones in bigger cities, but for those which are located less centrally, or whose programs were never completely full, there is an existential crisis, that results in a reduction of teaching staff, worsened working conditions, etc. MIZŠ is helping the most vulnerable schools with “financial injections” to uphold the structure of a national educational grid, providing “existenzminimum” for these educational institutions that play a vital role in their local community. MIZŠ admits that they did not expect such negative consequences (Mlakar 2017).

INTERVIEWS WITH OUR CLIENTS (EXCERPTS)

I conducted interviews with three of our clients, namely the two school principals, prof. Roman Vogrinc and prof. Bojan Bogatec Končan, directors of Ledina and Poljane Grammar School and school principle of Koseze Primary School, prof. Lorieta Pečoler, to compare the financial mechanism and the possible disturbance on all three schools where we intervened with our “*loaded nooks*”. When I asked about the implementation of MoFAS in 2013 I got positive responses from both grammar school principals and negative from the third:

- Prof. Vogrinc, Ledina Grammar School, Ljubljana, Slovenia: *“MoFAS allows a lot of financial autonomy and I feel motivated to save for such nonstandard spatial solutions.”*
- Prof. Končan, Poljane Grammar School, Ljubljana, Slovenia: *“Since the implementation of MoFAS we can successfully execute our investment strategy. We can do one project after another. Before there were less finances available for ‘free distribution’, we would have to file a request*

at MIZŠ or respond to a tender.”

- Prof. Lorieta Pečoler, Koseze Primary School in Ljubljana, Slovenia: *“We receive salaries from the state which are calculated within a year plan, so there is nothing we can save there and distribute somewhere else like high schools in the system of MoFAS. For every intervention of larger scale, we have to ask the Municipality of Ljubljana and go into tender.”*

When I asked about the recent spatial renovations and the possible disturbance of our *“loaded nooks”* on local (school) or national level (the MIZŠ normative and regulations) they responded:

- Prof. Vogrinc: *“There will be no breakthroughs with your examples. These can only be cherries on top of the cake. It cannot become a system. In centralized schooling, which is run by a traditional State by traditional officials (I do not criticize it because I firmly believe that education needs tradition), I do not think you can break through with this other idea, with your D places.”*
- Prof. Končan: *“Teachers feel sorry for the money that went into renovation of ‘in-between’ spaces because they would rather spend it on their own wages or their own classrooms. I cannot distribute this money into their salaries (it is against the law). They have all the necessary furniture and IT equipment which is required to execute a good lesson. They do not have insight nor information outside their own school. If they would, they would say: ‘When will you renovate the entrance lobby?’ and not ‘The old one was good enough!’ Most of them do not think so, but some of them are. These are the ‘rocks in the system’ that you will not move.”*
- Prof. Lorieta Pečoler: *“Teachers have different opinions about your interventions on the corridor. To some, especially the older ones, they are completely unnecessary, because the children constantly move these cubes around, built something with them and create mess on the corridor which prevents teachers to move freely around them. Sometimes children built walls, the other time they block the door, etc. This makes them furious sometimes. To younger teachers they are appealing and they sometimes use them for classes as well.”*

CONCLUSION

The most important discovery of this investigation into the chosen documents and interviews was the implementation of MoFAS. This seems to be

the main reason why there can be one “loaded nook” after another at a certain grammar school and why almost none get executed in the pre-primary or primary institutions or even high schools located in a more remote area (yellow projects on the case study map). Our “loaded nooks” are located in schools which are centrally located and well attended. Their financial autonomy seems to be greater, resembling a large private company, where the amount of funds at the end of the school year is almost entirely up to the resourcefulness and motivation of the school director. Being funded by the number of pupils means you need to “fight the market” and attract as many pupils as you can. In my belief, this also means taking care of the space - the school building you were entrusted with.

“Loaded nooks” or “D places” seem to be introducing and instigating a whole range of new behavioral patterns among pupils which sometimes scare the school principals and staff members. “Loaded nooks” are not just there, they irritate, “tickle”, destabilize the existing spatial and social perceptions. “Loaded nooks” will most likely excite pupils and consequently upset majority of the employees or even evoke the resistance of the cleaners and handymen who now have more maintenance and cleaning work. At the School Landscape (see figure 1), someone has to climb the curvy waves every day to properly clean them, at the new Pebble Atrium at Poljane Grammar School one must water the trees, sweep the leaves and at Koseze Primary School, some teachers accepted the idea of children “building walls” and playing on the corridor and the others never will. In our “continuous loading act” where we, at a certain school, stretched over several years, execute many “loaded nooks” it is really important for us to get a full support of the school director who can help us balance these new interventions within the school’s existing social and spatial reality. This is not easy, since we have to deconstruct the existing behavioral patterns, the daily routines of employees and pupils. In some way, we are deconstructing the existing hidden curriculum, which is beautifully described by Ksenija Bregar Golobič in the case of kindergartens: “The more daily practice in kindergarten is defined and self-evident, the more it is concealed, the more it has “clung under the skin” and is as such more resistant to change. Therefore, when we’re examining the established order of things in kindergartens, we should start where we are most convinced that things are right as they are, not where we are already doubting and insinuating”(Bregar Golobič 2015, p. 13). This is exactly what I am aiming at when I say that our “continuous loading act” is not merely a replacement of the in-between, leftover space (C) with + D, but x D.

A rather disturbing thought is that these “furious pedagogues”, that Principal Pečoler is talking about, or “rocks in the system” that the headmaster prof. Končan speaks of, help to co-create our rules and regulations for plan-

ning of pre-school and school architecture. In national groups, in addition to “advisers for this and that”, there are many more pedagogues than architects who, unfortunately, are not the leading architects from the practice, but those who are also representatives of the investor - the MIZŠ. In this way, we will hardly move forward.

Within our studio we have not given up just yet. We must raise the spatial awareness of (young) people and, above all, raise the threshold of spatial and mental “existenzminimum”.

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