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POLITECNICO DI MILANO

EARLY/MIDDLE STAGE RESEARCH

## DDR STATEMENT

Given the present history<sup>1</sup> object of study, the research proposes an empirical approach that does not aim to achieve a definitive response. On the contrary it has the intention to disentangle processes while being formed, thus requiring an experimental approach that accepts mistakes and approximations –aware of the possibility of failure–, and adopting reflection as an opportunity to step back from specific expectations and requirements, through a high degree of open-endedness.<sup>2</sup>

The reflexive design approach inherent to the DDR is used –even if in different ways– both in the first and third phase of the research.

On one side, the first phase, given the amount of data to be processed, adopts unconventional forms of restitution –multilayered thematic maps/interpretative cartography, diagrams, and timelines–, which are themselves contributions and research tools as mediums to enable reflections on practice<sup>3</sup> and to communicate the relevant findings between a researcher and a possible audience.

The third phase instead sees the reflexivity as inherent to the ethnographic investigations<sup>4</sup> – structured around “biographies of practices–” of a series of architectural offices object of study.

The research, which began a year ago, sees the occasion of CA2RE Hamburg as an important moment for discussion and collective reflection on the possible evolution of the project. The intention will be to focus mainly on the above-mentioned methodologies disentangling the design-driven research approach inherent them.

- 1 Franois Robert, ed., *Ecrire l'Histoire Du Temps Present* (Paris: CNRS, 1993).
- 2 Margitta Buchert, *Reflexive Design: Design and Research in Architecture*, ed. Margitta Buchert (Berlin: Jovis, 2014).
- 3 Margitta Buchert, *Processes of Reflexive Design* (Berlin: Jovis, 2018).
- 4 Henry Barnard, “Bourdieu and Ethnography: Reflexivity, Politics and Praxis,” in *An Introduction to the Work of Pierre Bourdieu: The Practice of Theory*, edited by Richard Harker, Cheleen Mahar, and Chris Wilkes. Palgrave Macmillan (1990): 58–85.

## INVESTIGATING THE 21ST CENTURY EMERGING APPROACHES TO PRACTICE: CODIFICATION OF ARCHITECTURAL EPISTEMES, FROM DISCOURSES TO PRACTICES

PAPER

*21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY, ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE,  
TACIT KNOWLEDGE, ARCHITECTURAL CODES,  
EMERGING APPROACHES TO PRACTICE*

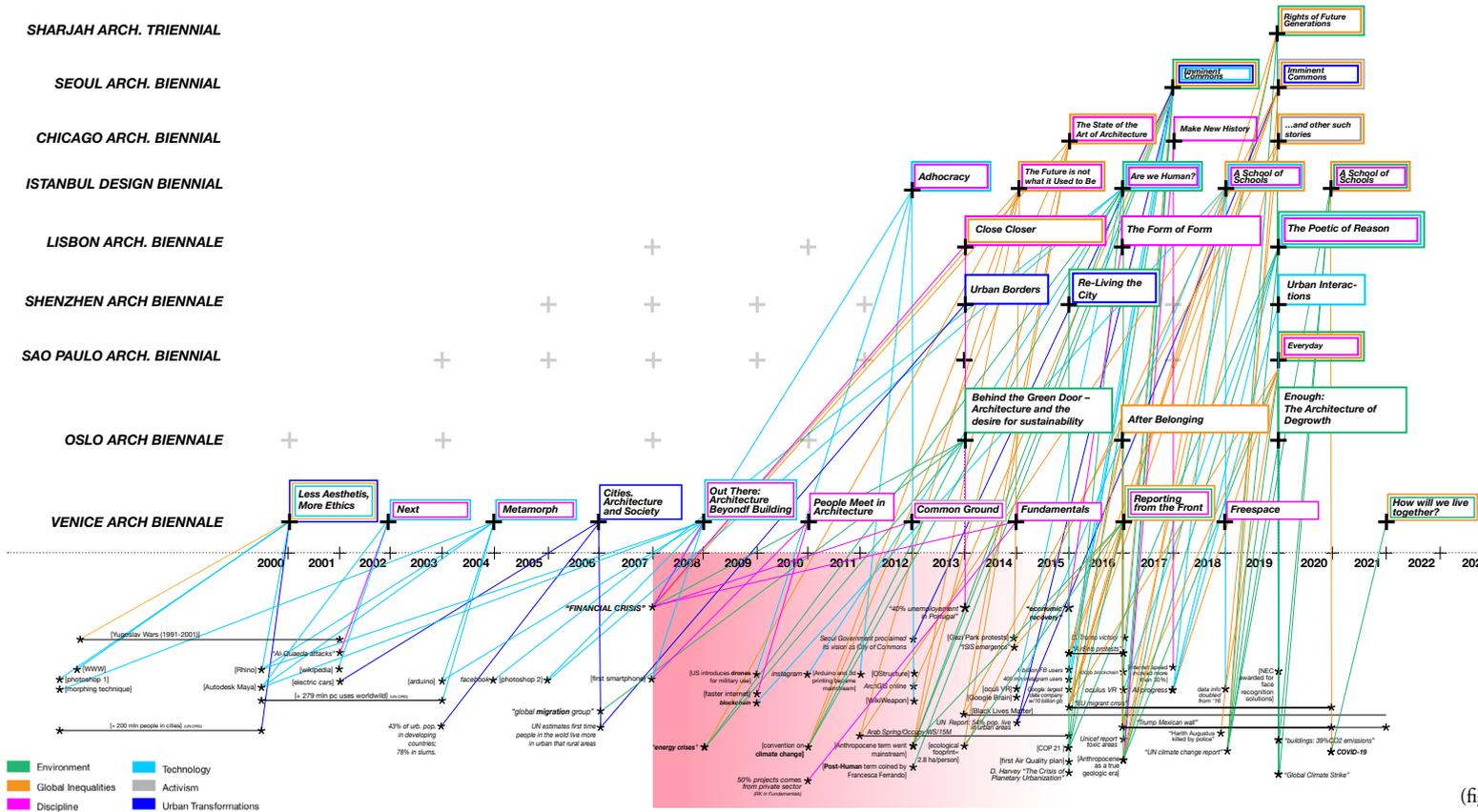
## ABSTRACT

Given the timeframe of the last 20 years, the research investigates the codification of diverse forms of tacit knowledge in architecture, its transfer, and translation from institutional narratives to principles and conventions that are crystallized in the everyday practice of selected design offices.

Positioned into the lines of theories that see architecture as “a product” of a socio-political-economic condition, the aim is to understand how events that have occurred/are occurring in current times influence the professional practice and, consequently, its codes.

The work is imagined to be developed through three phases. A first part –conceived as macro-analysis– is proposed as an attempt to reconstruct a historical framework of events not yet historicized; a second and intermediate one identifies the protagonists –or the practices that the research is interested at–; and a third one –as micro-analysis– made of in-depth investigations of case studies selected through the protagonists of the second phase.





(fig.2)

disciplinary agents in architecture” (19), a number of editions was selected in relation to their mediatic impact (20) and relevance for the recent discourse. The exhibitions were selected for different reasons that made them particularly relevant for the research goals: either because they approach an innovative theme that opens new streams of research –i.e., the Istanbul Design Biennale in 2012 for the first time spoke about open-source in relation to architecture and design– or because they contribute to consolidate in a single occasion a series of fragmented discourses into a unique narrative that offers instruments of interpretation for the discipline at large –i.e., the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chicago Biennale in 2017 curated by Johnston Marklee titled “Make New History” investigated the revival of historicism in contemporary practices (21).–

Once the analysis to define the time-frame of the research is formulated, the second phase will identify the protagonists of the contemporary debate, which will focus on the subsequent parts of the research. These practices are offices born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century whose production has become a reference for professionals and academics at large, after the so-called “architecture of exuberance” –that coincides with the financial crisis of 2008, which triggered the beginning of the decline of the star-architect system as a model–. The research sees such practices as a reaction to a context in which the market is adverse, global public commissions are decreasing, and construction is no longer at the center of production for architecture offices that instead assume research as a fundamental instrument to find models suitable for the current conjuncture.

The selection of the offices is based on their recurrence in the selected edition in Biennales and Triennales, which indicates an interest in their practice by curators, critics and the public. These practices are subsequently analyzed according to several parameters such as: typology of contribution to the events, general built production, role in academies, and critical engagement in the architectural debate

in general. A particular attention is given to the way in which these practices define their own agenda, i.e. –just to name a few–: multi-disciplinary collective, research agency, international architectural studio, hybrid practice, etc.

Such agencies have been subsequently classified according to two couple of opposed parameters: the impact of theory and practice in their production (from built projects to research –either unsolicited or outlined within academies and international exhibitions–), and the impact of disciplinary and transdisciplinary preoccupations in their agendas (i.e., either using the historicism as a form of resistance to global markets (23) or looking at other disciplines and current socio-political-economic urgencies as a field to draw upon to define new approaches to architecture). This led to the definition of four macro-approaches:

1. Offices whose production is mainly theoretical and responds in a trans-disciplinary way to current issues;
2. Offices whose production is both theoretical and design based, responding in a trans-disciplinary way to current issues;
3. Offices whose production is mainly theoretical responds to current issues in a disciplinary manner;
4. Offices whose production is both theoretical and design based, and responds to current issues in a disciplinary manner.

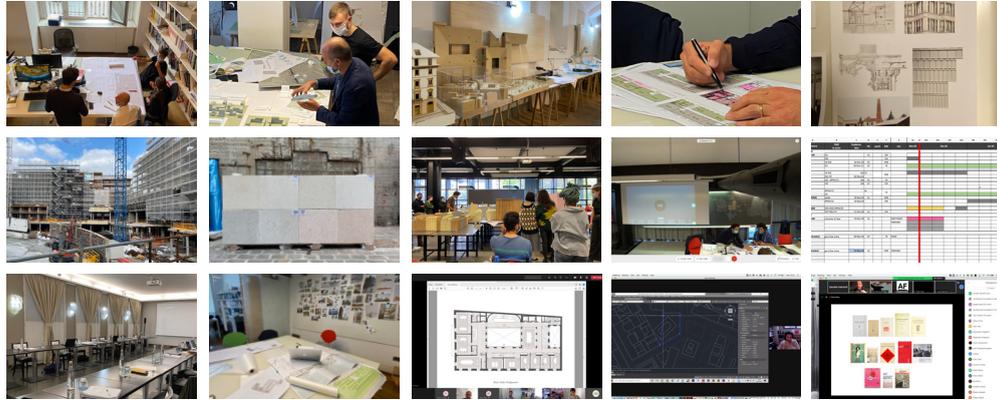
After this general classification, the second phase will culminate with the reconstruction of families/groups of practices in relation to their positioning towards the socio-political-economic conjuncture.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> phase –conceived around “biographies of practices”– analyzes in depth four case studies, each belonging to a different group/agency extracted from the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase families chart, and ideally characterized by different codes and conventions.

Due to the tacit nature of the investigated objects, the analysis are intended to be structured around an ethnographic approach. Such methodology is being tested over the secondment at *onsitestudio* (24) that –started in September 2020 and still running– is acting as a pilot case for the ethnographic research, whose analytical categories will be assessed and eventually reiterated with the other practices in order to extract a consistent body of sources (25).

The research, finalized at investigating the studio’s method and approach, aims to look on the one hand at the actual design process, while on the other at a whole series of collateral elements that influence it, such as: the workspace, the background of the people participating in the process, the positioning of the firm within the discipline, the real estate market, the reference system and the networking, to name a few. All these subjects will constitute a blueprint eventually reiterated with the other practices. The intention is to place as few a-priori limitations as possible, favoring greater flexibility and adaptation to local contingencies. Rather than following a project vertically, the study is being developed transversally involving as many activities as possible, introducing a certain degree of subjectivity relying on a tacit relationship between research, researched and the final product. As will be shown over the CA2RE + conference in Hamburg, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the investigation has in fact undergone some changes, extending its action between the physical and digital realm: construction

sites visits, face-to-face meetings, day-to-day observation of the office routine and design processes, and investigation of the physical archive, but also on-line meetings (both internal and with clients), interviews, production of surveys, on-line server survey, access to the study agenda, etc. All these elements are useful to outline a personal yet multifaceted picture of the design process of the office object of investigation, beyond the constructed image through which they publicly self-represent themselves.



(fig.3)

## Product

The above research activities, beyond a volume that will collect the main outcome of the methodological achievements, could lead to two additional distinct products referring respectively to the first and third research phases.

Given the amount of data to be processed, the first phase proposes the use of unconventional forms of restitution: –multi-layered thematic maps/interpretative cartography, diagrams, and time-lines–, which are themselves contributions and research tools. The diagrammatic exercise is seen as a search for a position and orientation through an expanded reading of relationality, experimenting methods and tools of the digital humanities (26). The diagrams are not intended as a final product, but rather as a research instrument and database, a medium to communicate the relevant findings and to serve as mediator between the researcher and possible readers.

The third phase instead, as a consequence of the ethnographic investigations conducted on select architectural offices, is proposed to be organized in publications consisting of statements and volumes, one per firm object of study. On the one hand, such format could reinforce the comparative nature of the investigation, on the other the series could embody the multiplicity of contemporary agencies. The objective of each publication should be in fact to extract the codes of each office, ideally offering an overview of today's ways of practicing.

Finally, positioning myself as a researcher with ten years' experience (27) in exhibition design as an instrument through which to communicate a research/project, in order to recollect the heterogeneous products (from interviews to publications, from videos to photographs, etc.), findings, and methodologies, the format of the exposition could be capable to implicitly unpack the codification process that the research project is looking for. On this purpose, Inge Daniels in her last publication(28) explores the potential of exhibitions as methodological tools to create forms of knowledge questioning two main points: on the one hand, the common opinion that exhibitions are the final outcome through which researchers disseminate their findings; on the other hand, the fact of being neutral arrangements of material culture with a primarily didactic purpose.

The dissertation sees in fact in the exhibition product the possibility to unfold the project globally, still preserving the heterogeneous nature of its different components. The exhibition could be considered as a site of production, capable of bridging theory and practice, as a medium of experimentation, providing an alternative to the built project as a bearer of the practice of architecture (29).

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- (8) Nowadays, the most evident challenges of the current societal shift, such as an increased awareness of equality at large –with a particular attention towards the role of women and minorities–, a search for alternative solutions to globalization and a critical take on the environment and technology after the optimism that had characterized the beginning of the new millennium (Roberts, Bryony (2020): "Expanding Modes of Practice," *Log* 48, p. 10.), are the preoccupations that inform the architectural discourse.
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- (19) which indicates the penetration of the concepts described in a single edition among practitioners and the general audience.
- (20) Epstein-Jones, Dora, Davidson, Cynthia, and Roberts, Bryony (2014): "New Ancients," *Log* 31.
- (21) Dunham-Jones, Ellen (2013): "The Irrational Exuberance of Rem Koolhaas," in: *Places Journal*, no. 2013.
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- (23) defined a-priori by the TACK board as part of the PhD offer.
- (24) Mills, Daniel (2010): *Stuff*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- (25) Marshall, Anne (2019): "Timeline Drawing Method," in: *Handbook of Research Methods in Preneec Liamputtong* (Ed.), Health Social Sciences, Singapore: Springer.
- (26) Practicing both as employee in various offices –ranging from Rem Koolhaas' OMA/AMO to Stefano Boeri's Multiplicity.lab passing through the Het Nieuwe Instituut, MVRDV and The Why Factory, among others–, well as with my collective Fosbury Architecture.
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### Image References

(fig.1)

The full political compass diagram (Version 0.1). ©Alejandro Zaera-Polo & Guillermo Fernandez Abascal

(fig.2)

The set of all the selected editions of the various Biennales/Triennales object of study will be able to map the rise of new topics/preoccupations, or their evolution over time, and more specifically the ways in which these are approached in relationship with the socio-political-economic context. © Claudia Mainardi.

(fig.3)

Excerpts from the first ethnographic investigation at *onstestudio* chosen a-priori by the TACK executive board. Such occasion has been used as a pilot case to define the blueprint for the research, whose analytical categories will be assessed and eventually reiterated with the other practices in order to extract a consistent body of sources. © Claudia Mainardi.