The Architect as Mediator

Two ways of designing dialogues with European residential communities
A conversation between the Unfolding Pavilion and Space Transcribers
“Our project is mostly about representation, about making different narratives visible, adding layers of richness to a space, and showing the potential of what is usually seen as a problem.”
One of the critics’ favourites at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale was not even part of the official event. The Unfolding Pavilion on the island of Giudecca transformed an empty apartment in a 1980s social housing block designed by the architect Gino Valle into a reflexive exhibition that aimed to include local residents rather than impose itself upon them. In this conversation, Davide Tommaso Ferrando, Sara Favargiotti and Daniel Tudor Munteanu, three of the curators behind the Unfolding Pavilion, discuss their project with Daniel Pereira and Fernando Ferreira from a network of architects called Space Transcribers, as well the latter’s project Transcribe, submitted to the Future Architecture platform Open Call 2017, and which explores the socio-spatial dynamics of another community in Braga, Portugal.

Davide Tommaso Ferrando  Daniel and Fernando, can you tell us what Transcribe is about?

Daniel Pereira  Transcribe is a one-year project commissioned by the Braga City Council in 2016 and sponsored by EU funding. The project was meant to tackle issues related to three social housing neighbourhoods in Braga that are mostly inhabited by Roma communities, two of which were undergoing a regeneration process: one more infrastructural, one more superficial. The city council asked us to work on the material and the social fabric of these neighbourhoods to bring new narratives to their realities. You can imagine the huge misconceptions that exist around these social housing complexes. People have lived there since the end of the 1970s and not much has changed, so these places are still
related to imaginaries of fear. Our idea was to enter these neighbourhoods, engage with the people and transcribe their reality by means of different kinds of media to allow their complexity to emerge and the city of Braga to acknowledge it. We designed a project divided into phases, the first of which was based on five workshops to be held together with the local communities.

**Fernando Ferreira** The first phase was about understanding these social housing neighbourhoods, collecting data. Two of them date from the late seventies, the third one is from the late eighties, and none of them was designed by a “star architect”. We researched the history of these three neighbourhoods and the migratory movements of their Roma communities.

**DP** For the second phase, we designed five workshops. Each one was tuned to the specific skills of the members of our NGO: photography, video, audio, model-making and gender mapping. We organised each of the workshops directly with their inhabitants. These people are used to receiving visits from academics who come with inquiries like, “what is your level of satisfaction with the neighbourhood, from 1 to 10?” The inhabitants don’t care about these surveys and don’t understand why they do them. So, we tried to engage with them in a more emotional and informal way.

**FF** We were interested in designing dialogues that would help us understand the constraints and the possibilities of these communities. With this information gathered, we could then start to mediate the lack of dialogue that existed between the residents and the public authorities: Bragahabit, the municipal company that holds these three social housing complexes, and Braga City Council.
We tried to maintain an independent position in order to better engage with them.

**DP** The first time we went to the estates, we went as representatives of the city council and Bragahabit, so the inhabitants started shouting at us, complaining about all the promises made by public institutions that had been broken. So, we understood that we should act as independent mediators.

The workshops followed the idea of taking decision-making powers to the neighbourhoods’ stakeholders, since the people from the municipality who are in charge of them don’t visit these complexes. Then, in July 2017, we launched an open call for a one-week experimental summer lab to be held in all three estates. The participants had to work with the inhabitants, understand their realities, and propose something performative. Interestingly, each summer lab engaged in a different way with the specific issues of the neighbourhood it addressed. The following phase was the exhibition that we organised inside an abandoned ceramic and glass factory. Here we presented all the material we had produced up to that point. We also exhibited archive photographs of the neighbourhoods from the 1970s that were made public for the first time. They document the precarious conditions in which the Roma communities used to live.

**FF** They also document, although indirectly, the speculation processes that have transformed the city of Braga during the last decades, showing how places that were once fields and informal settlements are now shopping centres.

Daniel Duarte Pereira and Fernando P. Ferreira are architects and co-founders of Space Transcribers. Space Transcribers is a non-profit organization and an international network of architects, urbanites and artists based in Braga, Portugal. Its methodology explores site-specific actions (workshops, events and exhibitions) that engage closely with places’ specificities and social dynamics, in a constant quest of contents and processes that can be transcribed into structured narratives.

“The first time we went to the estates the inhabitants started shouting at us.”
DTF Did the communities you worked with show up at the exhibition?

DP Some... actually, it was quite hard to bring them to the exhibition. They were all invited, we picked some up, but few came. The most important part of this project was the process, working with the inhabitants. The exhibition was mostly for the people of Braga, many of whom told us they had no idea these realities existed. Also, at the end of the exhibition, we organised a forum, inviting different stakeholders to discuss issues around social housing. And now the final phase is the book, the document that will preserve the legacy of what we did.

DTF Switching to the Unfolding Pavilion: in 2016 Magda, Oti, Daniel and I visited the Giudecca Social Housing complex and immediately fell in love with it, to the extent that we decided to organise an exhibition there for the next Venice Biennale.

In November 2017, after a very long and difficult period of email exchanges with the administration, Sara and I travelled for one week to Venice and managed to visit the apartment that would eventually host the exhibition. As a matter of fact, it was very difficult for us to collaborate with the city council, because we were proposing something completely new to them, and therefore no one wanted to take responsibility for it. Finally, we reached the following agreement: that they would let us organise an exhibition in exchange for us refurbishing – at our own expense – the apartment that hosted it, so that it could be rented out again at the end of the exhibition. Of course, we had mixed feelings about this: on one side, we wondered how they could ask us to take responsibility for a service that they were supposed to provide, but on
the other hand, we understood that we had a very good story to tell, and were excited at the idea of enriching our project with such a strong political meaning.

In March 2018, we finally signed a contract for “free and temporary use” of the apartment. The document didn’t allow any residential use, of course, but by sneaking a clause that said the apartment would become an “experimental space for artistic performances”, it allowed us to sleep in it during the following months. In the beginning, it really felt like squatting, given the bad conditions in which the apartment had been left. No hot water and no properly working toilets. In the following weeks, nevertheless, we managed to make the apartment look decent enough to host an exhibition. What we couldn’t fix ourselves – gas, electricity, and water – was contracted to a private firm, who we could pay thanks to financial support from Innsbruck University.
Sara Favargiotti  We painted the walls and louvres, we cleaned the apartment and the outside spaces, and did some gardening. In the beginning, the neighbours weren’t particularly happy, mainly because of the noise we were producing. But after a few days, many understood and appreciated what we were doing, to the point that in the end we became friends with some of them. We had interesting conversations in the common spaces of the complex. They shared with us how their sense of community had changed, remembering parties and barbecues all together. From my point of view, our project has somehow re-activated this lost sense of community by giving all of them something to be interested in: something to care for and discuss.

DTF  During these few months we connected with about twenty inhabitants. We kept them informed about what we were doing with leaflets left in their mailboxes. However, during the days of the exhibition only a few of them joined us. Those who came visited the apartment and some of them followed the events, but we expected more participation. One thing that has to be stressed, still, is that the most important ingredient of our project was the extraordinary quality of the building.

Daniel Tudor Munteanu  The Giudecca social housing complex is by a well-known Italian architect, Gino Valle, who used to be a professor in Venice, so both he and his building are well known in the city. It’s a sort of mat-building made of pavilions clustered around private patios and public squares. What struck me, when I first visited it, was that nobody used those public spaces. Probably the reason is that most of the inhabitants are still the original ones. They are now elderly and spend more time inside their homes. Interestingly, the installations that we exhibited occupied both the apartment and public
spaces, and the latter were the most welcomed by the inhabitants. Many were pretty sad when they learned we were going to remove them. Indeed, we always wanted to work on an exhibition that was going to be attractive not only for architects but also for the inhabitants of the complex. In this sense, I believe it worked, even if during the three days of events, which had a very casual and informal mood, they preferred to stay towards the margins.

**DP** Regarding the liveliness of these neighbourhoods: we all studied architecture and we always have in mind images of Nigel Anderson, Team X, Robin Hood Gardens and social housing complexes full of kids playing... When we think of collectiveness we think of people using these spaces. But the truth is that nowadays it is very hard to find lively places that don’t involve shopping centres. You need to have something that makes people want to go there. Nevertheless, when we first went to the Picoto estate, for example, the situation was different, almost picturesque. We saw a lot of kids playing and could actually feel the collectiveness. This is probably related to the fact that Roma communities are really close. They gather together and use public spaces a lot.
FF But I believe it is also related to the morphology of the building and to the scale of the public spaces. Our reality in Braga is very different from the one in Giudecca. Valle’s project is really great and, in some sense, reminds me of the Barbican, but it is very different from our reality, because the scale of our social housing neighbourhoods is much more human.

DP I must say I am quite sceptical about this. Most modern architects were optimistic about the idea of community and collectiveness. But this is a failure that we have inherited from that era. We can design collectiveness, beautiful typologies and patios, but people don’t go there if you don’t put a Starbucks inside. I think architects, in this sense, live closed in the idea that if you design quality spaces, people will follow. I feel that this is not true. What I find interesting, instead, is the question of strategy: not thinking only in terms of space, but also in terms of programme. Maybe a patio could be a place to organise dinners, in a certain moment, and in another, it could be turned into an urban garden. Architects might not even design space, but programmes for spaces.

FF We have to open space to indeterminacy: spaces must be flexible to allow their appropriation. In Braga it was very interesting to observe how the communities appropriate the balconies, for example, and the other public spaces. Hanging clothes there and so on. In modernist buildings appropriation and the possibility to play with public space has been lost.

DP I don’t think it has been lost, I think they have transitioned. Collectiveness, today, seems like a premise – something that everybody agrees on and nobody questions. But do we want collectiveness? Do we want everybody to
be together and do stuff together? Do we want a dialogue to exist? We think this is right. We think we have to create a dialogue between the administration and the inhabitants, that they have to agree. But is that the way?

FF I see two realities here: that of Venice, which I correlate with the Barbican, and that of Braga. And to me they are two different realities. What I have seen in the Barbican, where I studied the issue of solitude, is that people were always alone in the public spaces. What maybe needs to be capitalised upon is programming public space as you tried to do with your exhibition in Venice. You programme the events and provide an opportunity for the residents to take part in them, if they want. You need a catalyst, and then you see what happens – whether the people join or not.

DTF In our case, programming “activities” in the collective spaces of the Giudecca social housing was very important, because nothing had happened in those spaces for years, and the inhabitants told us they were fascinated to see hundreds of people walking around their everyday

“Do we want collectiveness? Do we want everybody to be together and do stuff together?”
places. This made them see their own home with different eyes. The same effect was produced by placing site-specific installations in those spaces and also by re-telling the story of the building by means of an exhibition dedicated to it. In a more or less planned way we managed to temporarily change the programme, the imaginary and the space of the Giudecca social housing. At the beginning of the project, the vast majority of the conversations we
had with the inhabitants would be about how badly the building was built, how many problems they had with the vertical typology of its apartments, the narrowness and steepness of the staircases, and so on. Problems that still exist, of course. But the very same people, during the days of the exhibition, would tell us how privileged they were to live in such a special and beautiful place. The fact is, the way you see a place also depends on the things that are said about it.

DP Yes, that’s the power of representation, of making something visible. Actually, I think our project is mostly about representation, about making different narratives visible, adding layers of richness to a space, and showing the potential of what is usually seen as a problem. We don’t design in the traditional sense, but what I see is that architects work really well as mediators: we know how to deal with different people with different skills.

FF Yes, because we have a perspective that makes us different from sociologists, anthropologists and social workers: the skill of representing, of making visible things to different kinds of public. For us, this was the goal of the whole project.

DP And in this sense, our two projects are related. It is not so much about the final outcome, but about the process. Of course, we are all happy about what we did, but the story of how we managed to do it, how things can be done in a different way, is more important.

FF Regarding the legacy of these projects, we are totally aware that we are just touching the tip of a huge iceberg. First, as you can imagine, the social housing neighbourhoods we worked with have many complex
dynamics and problems related to many fields such as politics, economics, architecture, sociology, and so on. We are aware that, during this phase, we can at least try to make these problems visible to the city and other entities. Now the idea is to continue and make this seed grow, in order to produce changes in the way in which these neighbourhoods are perceived, and in the way in which urban regeneration is usually approached.

**DP** I could say that the legacy doesn't come from us. Some residents of the Santa Tecla complex, for example, recently took part in an event in Braga proposing the creation of an office between them and the city council to mediate during the ongoing regeneration. When I spoke with some of the people who participated they told me that the project we did together helped them see that they needed this kind of mediation. I believe that this is a legacy of our project.

**DTF** To be honest, despite the fact that we refurbished one apartment and that this will be given back to the city, we know this doesn't change the situation in Venice. We discovered that there are hundreds of public apartments that are empty, just like ours, which is clearly a problem. What I can say at least, is that thanks to the Biennale and the media coverage our story received we had the chance to communicate to a wider international audience that this situation exists.

**DTM** You cannot solve the problems of a city through a building or an exhibition, that's clear. But you can draw the focus of the media and others on to a specific problem, hoping that your action will ignite a solution.

**DTF** Regarding budget, how much money did your project cost?
DP  The entire package, from research to the book, came to a little under 70,000 EUR.

DTF  This is a very big difference between our two projects. Whilst yours has been a one-year, full time commitment, we didn’t earn any money from it. We reinvested all the funds we gathered into the project itself. But how to make this a job is also an important question.

FF  The possibility to change this has to do with the political system. In our experience, we obtained the funding to do this project after an initial, pro-bono experience. We were very proactive, we did a workshop in which we organised everything, and the municipality realised it was something interesting. After two years they invited us to repeat the experience, but this time with public funds. It is very important to be in touch with the political system, with people who manage the city. In this case, we were quite lucky because we met a coordinator who supported us a great deal.

DP  It is about people. You need the city council, but you also need this one person who invites you and believes in you, someone who will help you in the end. From the beginning, we made clear that we would only work on the project if it was funded. At the same time, we anticipated that some of the results of our project could have cast a bad light on the municipality of Braga, regarding the way in which it deals with social housing, and they accepted that. We were quite lucky.

FF  That happens in all kinds of projects. If you can connect to the people you work with, the work flows. In this case, the coordinator trusted us even though she didn’t know us. She just liked what we did.

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In our case, we invited the people from the City Council of Venice, those who gave us the key to the apartment, to join our activities, and of course to take part in the opening event. Unfortunately, no one came. We don’t understand why and it is, of course, a pity.

Now I realise that our two projects are very different. You directly tackled the issues of the communities you worked with. You had a clear intention to work on the social dimension. For us, this was more of an outcome, since we first and foremost worked as curators who have to prepare a venue for an exhibition. It is interesting to see how both projects end up being architectural, but from very different points of view.

One more thing that I would like to add, is that our activity is to be read in the context of the Architecture Biennale, and that we really tried to do things in an unusual way. If you are part of the Biennale you organise
exhibitions, which take a huge amount of time and require huge budgets, and you are always constrained by the Biennale logo and the institutions that sponsor your activities. We, on the other hand, were doing things independently.

**DP** Were you not part of the programme of the Biennale?

**DTM** No, but we made it in time for the vernissage. By being there in that precise moment, people perceived us as being part of the Biennale. But the point is that if you want to have the Biennale logo in order to be an official collateral event, you need to pay a 15,000 EUR fee. Instead, with half of that budget, we managed to organise our exhibition. I think that in a way we are showing that things can be done differently by focusing only on what is important.

**DP** That is a statement. I didn’t know that, and I find it very subversive.

**DTF** In this sense, I find it quite funny to see so many people going to the Venice Biennale, taking part in its vernissages, dinners and parties, and then complaining about how superficial and useless this all is. I am happy that the Biennale exists! Without it, we would have never been able to organise the Unfolding Pavilion, as it is the importance of the Biennale that allows you to gather funds and people in one place. So if one specific edition of the Biennale is bad (like this year’s, I would say), we should of course criticise it. But I wouldn’t blame the Biennale. The Biennale as a tool is a very good tool: it all depends on how you use it. 

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