

# CROSS-CULTURAL AND DISCIPLINARY DESIGN WORKSHOPS: SHARING NEW PUBLIC SPACE ACTIVATION APPROACHES

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## Abstract

This paper synthesizes how three Research Units from three European universities launched a research and didactic program assuming an on-field approach to explore innovative methods of public space activation. The initiative has adopted the formula of three itinerating intensive workshops involving 45 students and ten tutors covering multidisciplinary fields (from Architectural and Urban Design to Environmental Design) to define new kinds of design approaches stimulating both project makers and local communities. This alternative pedagogic method allows students (coming from majors in architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture post-graduate courses) to test innovative approaches in response to local needs. By teaming up with colleagues and teachers familiar with the local environment, the participants can fasten the process of site understanding in terms of historical and current issues. At the same time, a survey on participants' satisfaction has estimated the program's performance outcomes. Results initially contribute to reformulating intensive teaching modalities like workshops, providing valuable insights for future experiences.

Keywords: Cross-cultural and -disciplinary Workshop, Public Space, Activation, Experimental Design, Pedagogy.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Public spaces' vitality is a theme mirroring multidisciplinary issues across contemporary cities, such as urban disrepair, loss of identity, and lack of social integration, affecting a group of sustainable development goals and, in general, urban living quality. Addressing these questions in this hyperconnected period entails reconsidering how global problems may find punctual declinations, contributing to new theories and practices supporting a new paradigmatic knowledge of design disciplines.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The European Commission has endorsed, via the Erasmus+ KA2 Action, funding teachers' and students' mobility and ensuring the possibility to experience cross-cultural and -disciplinary methods in person and on-site. The program is near its finale after three intensive workshops successfully held in Milan, Cracow, and Valencia. At this stage, evidence of strengths and weaknesses has materialized and allows us to open a reflection on the effectiveness of a cross-cultural and disciplinary-shared workshop as an innovative pedagogic model.

During the period 2020-2023, three Research Units from three European universities launched a research and didactic program called "APCUS" (an acronym for "The Activation of the Public Spaces of the City Centres through Ethical and Sustainable Design Based on the Local Communities - Participation / Response / Proaction") - assuming an on-field approach to explore innovative methods of public space activation. The initiative has adopted the formula of three itinerating intensive workshops involving 45 students each and ten tutors covering multidisciplinary fields (from Architectural and Urban Design to Environmental Design) to define new kinds of design approaches stimulating both project makers and local communities. The aim has been to increase the awareness of local diversity of urgencies influencing public space vitality by sharing transformative approaches from different cultural backgrounds and identifying design strategies in a collaborative environment.

Within the ACPUS project, we wanted to underline the needs and interdisciplinary aspects that come into play in the activation of urban space. We asked the students to familiarize themselves with the spatial and social issues of public spaces and with the modern methods of analysis and activities in this

sector, and we allowed them to interact with scholars and professionals who had the opportunity to question or work on the topic.

Over the years of working with the international students participating in the workshops, it has become evident how issues such as scarcity, inequality, mobility, migration or the many current crises directly impact the design of cities and public spaces due to their function, social or public. Furthermore, the technological transformation of the Internet of Things is also investing in urban realities, where, last but not least, both the climate crisis and the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have to be faced, situations that have added further challenges to current social problems of cities.

To address these issues, we asked the students, during the three workshops held in Milan, Krakow and Valencia, to evaluate the physical aspects of the space, such as the natural elements and their relationship with planning and architecture; the cultural context and the elements of identity; ethical issues, such as accessibility of public space, prevention of exclusion, integrative role of space, participatory processes and finally environmental issues in the context of sustainable design.

More specifically, in the remote lessons that preceded the workshop days in Milan organized by the Politecnico di Milano, the theme of the spatial context of the city and its evolution was touched upon through a contextual analysis of Milan's urban spaces, the relationship of these compared to a context historically rich in fertile lands and freshwater that has allowed its urban and architectural growth, to which in recent decades has been added an innovative push towards attention to Nature, also through the creation of new urban parks, the guided reforestation operations and innovative green architectures (such as the Vertical Forest by Stefano Boeri Associati). The context of the workshop was Piazza Tirana, a peripheral area west of Milan undergoing a tremendous and rapid transformation thanks to the arrival of the new M4 underground line.

In Krakow, in the distance lessons created by Politechnika Krakowska, the historical theme of the city's construction was touched upon and interfaced with the Austro-Hungarian military structures that still mark the landscape of the Polish city. Lectures introduced the themes of the quality of light in public spaces and the need for social participation in the design activity related to open spaces in Poland (and beyond). The study project occurred in the area adjacent to the Kamienna railway station, a marginal area that needs to re-weave its urban fabric and, above all, with the renewed use of public spaces.

In Valencia, the remote activities organized by Universidad CEU Cardenal Herrera have highlighted the mapping of the city space in its structure and typology, underlining the historical context of the Spanish city and its strong identity also through a narrative that has embraced the last thirty years of Valencian planning to achieve the sustainable goal of a new city based on greenery and related public spaces. Eventually, the lectures introduced placemaking as an accelerator tool for the citizens' appropriation of public space. The workshop project focused on the Marina area, a central place in the city that has yet to find its exact dimensional location in the urban context of Valencia.



*Figure 1. Group Photo in Piazza Tirana, Milan, in November 2021. The first workshop activity after the pandemic. (Picture: Luca MF Fabris)*

### 3 AN INCREMENTAL WORKING METHOD FORGING HYBRID, SHARED, AND INTENSE DESIGN EXPERIENCES

Conceiving and developing the CCDDW (Cross-cultural and -disciplinary Design Workshops) showcased similarities and diversities compared to traditional workshops' formula [1]. As all the pedagogic programs envisioned in the 2020s, the teaching methods have been deeply affected by the Coronavirus pandemic, posing crucial questions of both conceptual frameworks and operational implementations to educators worldwide. Even though the epochal fact of the sanitarian crisis cannot be ignored in the attempt to seize such elements of permanence and variability, it has also to be remarked that many didactic patterns were already shifting toward new formats, where the support of technology was just one of the aspects fueling innovation. So, it was for the ACPUS, Activation of Contemporary Public Spaces program, where the goal was far beyond teaching how to design public spaces *per se* but framed architectural education as a prism through which to observe the complexity of contemporary urban realities, paying particular attention to their socio-economic fragilities and, at the same time, transformative opportunities.

This attitude corresponds with works showcasing how to design workshops set the conditions for mutual exchange between participants and contexts of application [2]. While recent works [3] [4] framed systematic or historical educational trends, this experience contributes more to research aiming at scrutinizing contemporary design pedagogies [5] [6] [7], which emphasized the blurred boundaries between teaching, design, research, and practice.

To build global citizenship through international dialogues, collaboration, and understanding of specific but recurrent problems like public space's vitality, we proposed blended design experiences to increase methodological sharedness among students. These new common grounds were the ideal space to explore how transversal challenges unfold in peculiar contexts and how shared approaches could lead to original proposals. In thinking about this, we find ourselves aligned with the words of Jones and Hyde [8], who say, "The project is the client: perhaps society, perhaps future users, perhaps the environment ... but the project certainly is not the building."



*Figure 2. On-site design workshop in Valencia: a team formed by students from the three universities discuss design choices. (Photo by G. Sempregon)*

The CCDDW integrates activities through two primary modalities: the online preparatory seminars, COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning), and the on-site design workshop. The first part focused on one hand on providing basic information, such as historical background, current conditions, and urgent problems; on the other hand, identifying key concepts, themes, and operative instructions. These meetings, which spanned from five to ten in the three workshops, allowed students to gradually approach the central question in its contingencies, from the physical ambiance to the socio-cultural context, and in its thematic openness, from theoretical and practical points of view. The online recorded seminars created a digital archive accessible in a-synchronic modality.

The in-situ design workshop followed these informative activities—a five-day intensive experience in the three venues. The students clustered teams composed of members from all three universities, so each group had one person familiar with the context. In this way, the students were actively learning from each other, starting from personal experiences, immediately "breaking the ice" that usually features

first-time personal contacts. These first interactions triggered processes of self-confidence and created optimal conditions for intense participation and commitment. Like other design workshops, the learning-by-doing approach became the operative framework of on-site activities. One added value of CCDDW is the immediate, spontaneous, and intense exchange between local and foreign participants beyond the conventional discussions between students, tutors, and guests.

The design outcomes proved to be more than satisfactory. Nevertheless, the surprisingly positive results that emerged from these CCDDW were appreciable more in terms of personal feedback, as shown by the questionnaire illustrated in the next paragraph. The participants expressed enthusiasm for a formula that allowed them to maximize the benefits of in-situ activities through COIL methods and learning directly and actively from their home colleagues beyond assimilating information from the teaching staff.

#### **4 THE RESULTS OF THE BLENDED TEACHING EXPERIENCE THAT COMBINES SYNCHRONOUS COIL OPPORTUNITIES WITH FACE-TO-FACE WORKSHOPS**

The result of the three different workshops can be mainly considered satisfactory in terms of didactic experimentation and in terms of project output collected. The panel of international teachers, coming from the three institutions involved, considered the design ideas that arose from the student's work to be very valid under various aspects: the ability to read the place, the proactivity in identifying general solutions and translating them into the specificity of the context, the quality of communication and representation. This result indeed constitutes the most tangible point of arrival of the varied teaching experience, with online seminars alternating with face-to-face work sessions, in the various offices of the participating institutions (Milan, Krakow, Valencia) [9].



*Figure 3 - Krakow workshop: Collage of presentations by the groups of students. (Photo by R.M. Balzarotti)*

We can identify some patterns common to the three different shared work opportunities in Milan, Krakow and Valencia, both face-to-face and online, which identify the strengths of the 'blended' teaching experience.

- The possibility of sharing experiences face-to-face with international colleagues in a context different from one's usual place of study certainly generated high motivation and dedication to work. Undoubtedly a contribution to this enthusiasm was caused by the previous (and partly concomitant) restrictions on travel and face-to-face lessons due to the Covid pandemic.
- The extremely full-time teaching experience helped to maintain high levels of commitment and involvement, setting extremely close and tangible objectives without any postponing option.
- The interaction with peers of different origins, cultures, and training has allowed exchanges in the methodology of approach to the project, in analyzing and proposing solutions for the contemporary



public space, and in the representation techniques considered most suitable to present in a short time, own ideas, promoting the exchange of intercultural skills.

- The use of online seminars as preparatory events for the workshops has made it possible to dilate the actual learning times, involving local personalities and professionals in illustrating the specific peculiarities of the place object of the three projects, without the need for a trip, with the costs and logistics that follow. The synchronous mode was considered the most suitable for delivering online seminars as it was more engaging than other methods.
- Both the seminars and the face-to-face experiences were attended by the teaching panel of the three partner institutions of the project, allowing exchange between students at the teaching level and comparing and exchanging communicative languages and different learning styles.
- The levels of involvement and dedication were similar in all three workshop experiences despite the lack of an established competitive system. The final results, presented in a collaborative and participatory way (such as PechaKucha), did not need to assign marks, rankings or merit awards.
- In support of the success of the teaching experience, it is possible to analyze the good results of the questionnaire carried out on a sample of 50 participants in the teaching experience (online seminars and workshops) coming from the three universities involved in the project and from 18 different countries. The sample of 50 students represents about a third of the total participants (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Countries of origin of the participating students.

The satisfaction levels recorded can be considered decidedly high, both in terms of overall experience and individual-specific aspects. On the general aspects, there is 76% approval for the statement "I am satisfied with the result I achieved during the intensive design workshop". Percentages confirmed or even increased when asked about possible future developments of the method, asking the question of possible participation in a future similar experience (92% positive responses) or suggesting it to other students in one's circle (94% positive responses).

The specificity of the chosen formula also received positive evaluations. Although the two questions below are those that have obtained lower satisfaction results in absolute terms, they are, in any case, confirmed by around two-thirds of the total participants (respectively 66% and 68%). This value shows how the teaching method has much potential, but at the same time, the levels of involvement and interest in the COIL activity need to be better calibrated (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6).

6. The preliminary part of the workshops, performed online with lectures by experts in the field, has been useful to my design experience on field.

[More Details](#) [Insights](#)

<span style="color: blue;">●</span> I agree	34
<span style="color: orange;">●</span> I don't agree	1
<span style="color: green;">●</span> Neutral	15

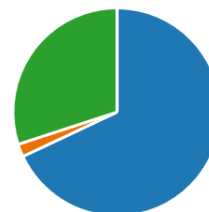


Fig. 5: Post-workshop activity student's survey. Results for question n. 6.

7. Combining preliminary online and design offline activities is a good method that allowed me to conjugate the workshops' exercises with my university's agenda (classes, exams, internships, and so on).

[More Details](#)

<span style="color: blue;">●</span> I agree	33
<span style="color: orange;">●</span> I don't agree	5
<span style="color: green;">●</span> Neutral	12



Fig. 6. Post-workshop activity student's survey. Results for question n. 7.

Also, from the point of view of the speed of learning, the ability to develop adaptation to the context and develop operational flexibility, the method of combining preparatory activities and seminars with the workshop led by local advisors, teachers and students have much more than satisfactory results (NB: the active groups in the workshops have always formed uniting at least one member from each university they belong to) with respectively 94% and 88% of positive responses to the questions presented in Fig. 7 and Fig. 8.

11. I think that these type of workshop(s) can fasten the process of site understanding in terms of historical and current issues.

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<span style="color: blue;">●</span> I Agree	47
<span style="color: orange;">●</span> I do not agree	1
<span style="color: green;">●</span> Neutral	2



13. Participating in international design workshops with local students familiar with the context has been beneficial to interpret and understand the projects site.

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<span style="color: blue;">●</span> I agree	44
<span style="color: orange;">●</span> I don't agree	2
<span style="color: green;">●</span> Neutral	4



Fig. 7 and Fig. 8: Post-workshop activity student's survey. Results questions n. 11 (above) and 13.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The synchronous COIL mixed method alternating with face-to-face workshops has mainly been satisfactory in terms of results and student involvement, showing how is particularly appreciable and fruitful what is linked to the exchange between different cultures and different teaching methods, drawing added value from the possibility of having the learning phases (lectures) and work phases (workshops) introduced and coordinated by teachers, experts and students rooted in the local reality.

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