

DISCOVERING THEORY

AUTHOR

John Carp
Department of Design systems
Faculty of Architecture
Eindhoven University of Technology
Eindhoven
The Netherlands

And the Arnhem Academy of Architecture
Arnhem
The Netherlands

A didactical strategy for teaching architectural design theory and methods

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This abstract describes a course in design theory and methods for students in architecture. It deals with the principles of Morphogenetic Design, in a didactical setting.

The course is special in the way that theory and methods are not being taught formally, but discovered by the students themselves. The mechanism for acquiring this knowledge is by means of a series of exercises the students have to carry out. Each exercise is put before the students with a minimum of explanation. The purpose of the exercise is explained afterwards, making maximal use of group discussions on the results of the exercise. The discussion is being focused on comparing the similarities and differences in the variants the students have produced. The aim of the discussion is firstly to discover the structural properties of these variants (the theory) and secondly to discover the most appropriate way of establishing these structural properties (the methods). The variants have come on the table by means of the group effort. The habitual reluctance of architects, when required to produce variants, is thus being overcome. Morphogenetic themes like creation, evaluation and selection are being dealt with in a natural way.

The course was developed after experiencing a number of unsuccessful teaching attempts. At first the course followed a conventional pattern in which theory and introduction of methods preceded the exercises. This did not work as theory and methods turned out to remain too abstract for fruitful application. Reversing the routine of the course by starting off with the exercises, theory and methods were understood immediately as their purpose had become evident. This meant as well, that the

discussion could home in on the real issues, rather than remaining on the superficial level of the relevance of theory and methods for architectural design, as is so often -and so frustratingly- the case.

The framework of the course is formed on the ideas of the SAR, the Foundation for Architects' Research. The SAR has proposed to distinguish in the planning process a number of separate design levels. These levels should each have an intrinsic architectural and socio-economic identity, thus serving as separate realms of decision making and responsibility. A plan on a certain level should allow plans of a lower level to be accommodated. These subsequent plans may even be the responsibility of others clients and architects. Therefore, a general requirement of plans is, that they should be open to further design decisions and should be evaluated accordingly.

The idea of open planning in architecture has proved to be extremely difficult to understand and adopt by architects, as it departs so dramatically from conventional design practice. In conventional practice, architects are not accustomed to working in an open planning environment. Consequently, the ideas of SAR have led to much heated debate, more often than not with as its outcome, that these ideas were being dismissed as impractical and too far removed from reality.

In the course that will be described, this debate is by no means being evaded, but neither does it interfere with the acquisition of knowledge and experience. In fact, the special strategy adopted by the course, tends to de-politicise the debate, placing it firmly in the realm architects should be dealing with, i.e. the architectural consequences of architectural decisions.