

Embedding learning places in a sociophysical territory: a case study in the city of L'Hospitalet

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Abstract—*Within the framework of the A-Place project, co-funded by the Creative Europe programme 2019-23, we have carried out a comprehensive programme of educational and creative activities integrated in the community of L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Barcelona. These activities, embedded in the sociophysical territory, and undertaken with the collaboration of artists and teachers, students of diverse educational levels, and with the participation of residents from diverse social groups, have contributed to forging links between people and the spaces they inhabit.*

Keywords—*placemaking, situated learning, learning spaces*

I. INTRODUCTION

Placemaking can contribute to creating learning places that are integrated in the community, rather than confined to the classroom. Moreover, the combination of placemaking with artistic practices offers an opportunity to embed educational activities in the cultural, social and physical milieu. In the context of placemaking, artists and educational staff, students and residents become active participants in learning processes embedded in a sociophysical territory of the community.

The purpose of the educational and creative activities which we have carried out in the last three years as part of the A-Place project [1] was to involve students and staff from university and high schools, along with artists and neighbours, in a common reflection on the sense of place and the collective identity using the city of L'Hospitalet as case study.

II. EMLACING ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

Placemaking aims to empower people to transform their living environment into a “place to feel good in, to belong to and be proud of” [2]. To achieve this, community members are actively involved in a learning process which encompasses several stages: defining a place and identifying stakeholders, evaluating their living environment, proposing a vision for change, implementing and evaluating the changes, assessing the impact of the transformations and propose new actions. This sequence is not linear, but iterative: once the change has been performed it follows an iterative process of action and reflection which leads to the reformulation of the initial aims and to new actions [3]. As in action research, the actors affected by the problem at stake are involved “in the research through a cyclical process of

fact finding, action, and reflection, leading to further inquiry and action for change”, as described by Minkler [4]. Therefore, placemaking can be thought of as a “learning place” that is embedded in the sociophysical milieu, and as a form of participatory action research where community members are engaged in the definition and solution of a problem, with the shared purpose of transforming the existing environment.

Schneekloth and Shibley see placemaking as an opportunity to “move beyond expert models to relocate and embed architecture –*inplace*– within a broader human endeavor that we call placemaking”[5]. In placemaking, “knowledges of the professional, the place, and the local people are shared, disputed, negotiated, and considered”[5]. As Till argued, in order to work with non-experts, architects might need “to re-imagine their knowledge from the perspective of the user” in order “to move between the world of expert and user, with one set of knowledge and experience informing the other”[6]. Therefore, placemaking enables the creation of spaces of dialogue between experts and non-experts; it offers an opportunity to expand the architecture discourse beyond the realm of the expert culture to include the complexity of real-world problems and empowers people to take part in the “inclusive, democratic, and civic projects of the twenty-first century”[5], as Schneekloth and Shibley contended.

In A-Place, we aim to create learning places that encourage the collaboration between academia and community, art and architecture in both digital and physical environments. These learning places provides opportunities for the production of situated knowledge, involving experts and non-experts, which enable future professionals to gain a deeper understanding of the concerns of the community and the relationship between people and their environment.

III. CREATING LEARNING PLACES

The learning places we have created have evolved over the course of the last three years, adapting to the local conditions and resources available. In the first year, due to the pandemic, we had to analyse the sociophysical territory using digital media. In the second year, we developed a hybrid programme of online and onsite activities, intertwining three subjects of the architectural curriculum: Design studio, Urban planning and Systems of Representation [7]. In the third year, the participating

subjects have been Systems of Representation, Tectonics and an elective course.

In the academic year 2021-22, the courses at La Salle School of Architecture that included activities integrated with the A-Place project were as follows:

A. Installations in public space

- Students of the elective seminar “Mapping and constructing places” (September 2021-January 2022), collaborated with pupils from local schools in the design and construction of objects to transform the public space around Plaça de la Cultura in Bellvitge neighbourhood. In addition, they proposed a plan for placemaking activities which was discussed with two local artists in a presentation taking place in the civic centre of La Florida district.

B. Visual analysis of the cityscape

- In the first semester of the Systems of Representation course (September 2021- January 2022) third-year students carried out a visual analysis of the cityscape of L’Hospitalet with the photographic camera. At the end of the semester, there was a workshop with artist Teresa Rubio to map the visual testimonies onto a map of the city using collage techniques.

C. Integrated teaching and learning activities

- In the second semester (February-June 2022), students of the Systems of Representation course undertook a socio-physical analysis of the city through audiovisual language. Miquel García, a multidisciplinary artist, and filmmaker Claudio Zulian supervised the students’ work, in collaboration with the architecture staff. Students’ videos were on display at Plantauno, a local art hub. This event was included in the programme of the New European Bauhaus Festival. The students’ recordings were subsequently used by the two artists to create two videos that summarized the collective work.

D. ES_CULTURA: Public art festival

The aim of the “ES_CULTURA” festival, which was held for the first time in November 2022, was to continue with the public space transformation activities initiated in 2021 with the installation of objects designed and built by students from local schools and architecture students in Plaça de la Cultura. An open call for students from secondary schools and university, as well as for artists was organized. Forty-two proposals were received, and ten were selected by a jury to be built and installed in the square. Students from Systems of Representation and Tectonics courses presented their proposals to the call. The festival featured a two-day event with activities such as music, dance, painting, and sculpture, bringing together community members, artists, and students to collectively transform the public space.

CONCLUSIONS

After three years developing educational and creative activities in the city of L’Hospitalet, the collaboration with local actors (schools, civic organisations, cultural centres, municipality) has expanded and we have been able to create learning places that are more embedded in the sociophysical territory. The art festival ES_CULTURA is an example of this. However, to implement learning process in and with the community we need flexible strategies to manage open, creative

processes over time. This includes dealing with constraints and unexpected obstacles.

Moreover, interconnecting subjects in the curriculum, creating links between universities and high schools, and fostering fruitful dialogues between experts and community members in a specific social and physical context, requires a significant communication effort from all parties involved: staff, students and community members. It is also necessary that the participants involved understand and are able to situate themselves in such open, dynamic and collaborative learning process. Therefore, effective communication among all actors involved in the learning and creative processes is essential to maintaining engagement and commitment.

The ultimate goal of our transversal, community-embedded learning activities is to bring about structural changes both in the academic curriculum and in the local community. However, these changes may take a long time to materialise and may be difficult to track. From a community perspective, placemaking can help to visualize the meanings, values and experiences that underlie a physical space through educational and participatory creative activities. The extent to which changes contribute to increasing the sense of belonging and identity of a community are however difficult to determine, particularly in the short-term. Similarly, the changes in the academic curriculum to facilitate community-based learning projects may be difficult to justify if their feasibility depends on local conditions such as the actors involved, the motivation of the participants, and the expected outputs.

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