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The Architecture of Need (Lisbon/Evora, 29–30 Oct 24)

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The Architecture of Need: Collective-Use Facilities and Community Service in the Twentieth Century - International Conference.

Human need is one of the foundations of architecture. Its expression becomes particularly intense when conveyed by the community or in the name of the community, as a collective, shared necessity. Yet we often lose sight of this essential aspect of built environment production processes, focusing instead on matters such as design intentions, formal or technical innovation and authorship. The international conference The Architecture of Need wants to bring together current research efforts to reconsider the role of need in the equation of architectural production by examining how collective-use facilities, devised for community service in response to specific needs, originated and came to fruition in the twentieth century, in any geography. We want to reassess essential need as a key proviso in architecture, and how this determined our existing building stock, at a time when resource scarcity demands that architectural practice and thought contribute towards sustainable, participated built environment management strategies and resist the lure of often questionable building growth trends.

Common Needs, Common Buildings

Scholarship has only partly explored the built translation of collective needs. While the provision of built infrastructure to address the essential, everyday needs of communities has long been a fertile ground for architecture work, the history, theory, criticism and culture of the discipline have tended to single out notable design objects to feed its canon, from school buildings to housing ensembles. Yet by applying art-historical hierarchies of value to this output, we overlook the substantial array of collective-use structures that inconspicuously punctuate local urban and rural communities, serving them – their architecture of proximity.

These buildings, mostly architect-designed, are part of our daily lives and testify to architecture's attempts at social relevance, as material bonds between creators and users of the built environment. They can be common buildings: common in essence, as borne out of joint initiatives, drawing on common funds and aimed at collective utility; and common in their appearance. They are often seen more as functional pieces for pragmatic service and less as works of architecture deserving study.

In fact, in all their commonness and inconspicuousness, these are meaningful structures: they

speak of how the most basic needs of a community were formulated, and by whom; how diverse agents – from local individuals and groups to authorities and institutions at all levels, from the State to charities and philanthropies – interacted and negotiated the assessment, prioritisation, translation and fulfilment of such needs; how the provision of collective facilities fitted (or countered) the official and unofficial strategies of those agents; and how their fortune over time signals changing requirements, adjustment imperatives and potential resilience. At a time of heightened tensions between the collective and the individual, the infrastructure of common necessity fulfilment, as materialised through collective initiatives in the past, has the potential to mobilise architectural thought today.

Needs: Past, Present, Future

Collective-use facilities are therefore repositories of common needs and their forms of built expression. Today, they combine material worth – as sturdy testaments to the popularisation of reinforced concrete construction and long-lasting cladding choices, for example – with less palpable values such as their significance for collective life. They are the stage of community living: where we reside, work, study, convalesce, protect, and enjoy ourselves, and where individual and collective identities are forged – where the experiences of groups and subjects concur. Often, de--functionalisation and obsolescence entail these facilities' decay and occasional demise, regardless of their decades of community service, materiality, and embedded energy.

Understanding these buildings, their production and use processes means understanding the communities they serve, their history, their current concerns, and their prospects for tomorrow. Can this exercise of historical and critical research be put towards strategies of refunctionalisation, reuse and life extension of existing structures? How can this be done together with citizens in a shared, participated way, which might be relatable, appropriable, and integrated with people's daily lives? Can better scholarly knowledge result in improved living standards, where collective-use facilities are concerned?

The international conference The Architecture of Need welcomes scholarship on any geography that investigates how built-environment-related disciplines, and architecture in particular, addressed the basic needs of local communities in the twentieth century, and examines how needs were expressed and translated in collective-use structures, or how knowledge of these objects can be cocreated with users and communities. Accepted papers will cover, among other topics:

- Architectural responses to disparate collective needs, from subsistence to sanitation, from emergency and minimum-rent housing to healthcare and security, from compulsory schooling to senior living, from sports practice to culture.

- The expression and negotiation of needs by disparate agents and through different means and media, from official procedure to public campaigning, paying close attention to the on- and off-the-record discourses and voices and their repercussion on solutions proposed (Who were the subjects of need here? Who spoke for them and how, in dictatorship and democracy? Who decided on priority, on what grounds and conditions?).

- The origin, nature and position of those agents, their strategies and scope of action, and the

mechanisms established to channel resources and resolve towards the provision of infrastructure to mitigate need (funding, legislation, administration, bureaucracy, advocacy, cooperation, mutuality; e.g. How did specific programmes and answers follow local specificities? How were generic or transnational approaches adjusted locally?).

- The challenges posed to architectural design by particular aspects of collective need, such as its scale, its economic imperative, its replicability potential (How did architectural design issues overcome quantity and economy constraints? How did this impact on architecture's purported capacity to embody national, regional, and local identities? Did pragmatism trump creativity? Did these buildings add to / alter recognised architectural typologies?).

- The objects produced, their fortune over time and their current and potential roles in local communities, including their ability to adapt and the challenges posed by de-functionalisation, obsolesce and disuse (What was the essential toolkit employed in this architecture of proximity? Which mechanisms, of design, technology, and materiality, proved lasting? What enables, and hinders, reuse?).

- Attempts at reconstructing the use history of these facilities over time (What can we learn from this? How do we approach and record the history of use?), and

- Experiments in co-producing knowledge on collective-use facilities and rendering it appropriable by communities in support of built environment management (How can methods such as oral history, public history and ethnography be employed? What might the specific contribution of architectural thought be, and how can this be communicated clearly and broadly?).

We welcome papers that focus on little-studied contexts, cultures, agents and objects, and work that is grounded on primary source material by using history methods and those of other disciplines; research that looks at institutions, programmes, administration, and law, or adopt more specifically architectural lines of enquiry (e.g. morphological and spatial analysis). This conference is an opportunity to debate new approaches to the metadata of architectural design and production – with the archive at its core – and the methodological challenges facing architectural history, theory, and criticism as they deal with the ubiquitous mass of common buildings created to address common needs, on the one hand, and with the urgency of inclusiveness in knowledge creation, on the other.

The conference programme includes keynote talks by Janina Gosseye (TU Delft) and Tania Sengupta (The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London).

The conference sessions and keynote addresses will take place on the 29th and 30th of October 2024 at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon. A study tour to Évora is scheduled for the 31st of October 2024 (TBC).

Please apply by submitting an abstract for a 20 minute presentation (maximum 350 words, outlining your focus, argument, source material and methodology) and a short biography (maximum 200 words) in one PDF document (titled 2024AN_SURNAME_PaperProposal.pdf), on or before the 17th of May 2024, via email to contacto@arquitecturaaqui.eu

Any questions or inquiries can be sent to the same address.

The results of the CFP will be announced on or before the 18th of June 2024.

The conference and presentations will be in English. All presentations will take place on-site.

For further information, please visit the conference website: https://www.architectureneed.com/

Reference:

CFP: The Architecture of Need (Lisbon/Evora, 29-30 Oct 24). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 20, 2024 (accessed Sep 6, 2025), <https://arthist.net/archive/41483>.