

Clara, no. 12: Questioning the Profession – Architect and Planner Cooperatives

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Questioning the Profession: Architect and Planner Cooperatives.

Since its Western inception in the early Renaissance, the profession of architecture has been marked by the tension between the collective dimension that makes its production possible – from the extraction of resources, to the construction site, to post-occupancy maintenance – and the focus of historians and critics, as well as of architects themselves, on the notion of the architect-creator. In contemporary times, this tension has been further enhanced by the capitalist production and economic context, which for commercial and media purposes glorifies the figure of the single architect – the “archistar” – while concealing the large and multidisciplinary firms that they usually lead.

However, throughout the twentieth century, and especially in the postwar years, several initiatives in the global North and South sought to reimagine the profession itself in the form of organizations that might be less complicit in the capitalist drive to commodify and individualize the architect-creator. These included, for example, several cooperative organizations (very often aligned with left-wing parties and movements) that emerged within and beyond Europe, in which architects, urban planners, landscape architects, historians, artists, geographers, economists, lawyers, and sociologists sought to bring together new forms of transdisciplinary professional practice. According to the protagonists of some of these attempted counter-practices, the search for new forms of organization was not only a way of challenging the economic and productive system in which they operated but also a creative project linked to disciplinary visions of socio-political change and action.

The less politicized of these professional formations still sought to constitute a more collective and multidisciplinary design practice, while the most radical assumed consultative roles based on architects’ direct collaboration with professionals from other disciplines and organized civil society. The legacy of the architect, theorist, and former guerrilla fighter Sérgio Ferro from Latin America to Europe and back is a case in point. Exiled from Brazil to France in the late 1960s, Ferro dedicated his life’s work to repositioning architecture within the sphere of social production through a critique of the exploitation of workers on the construction site. After the re-democratization of Brazil in the 1980s, Ferro’s work as an architect and theorist came to theoretically subsidize the formation of several *assessorias técnicas* (technical advisories), such as USINA, a multidisciplinary group in which architects, along with lawyers, planners, and sociologists, partner with so-called urban social movements to collectively design and build housing projects in the center and periphery of cities like São Paulo, as part of a broader socio-political agenda to combat homeless-

ness and human rights violations.

Diverse in terms of their protagonists, locations, and cultural contexts, these cooperative associations shared several common characteristics: they sought to overcome the idea of individual authorship in favor of anonymous group collaboration and a focus on process; the combination of political militancy, design activity, and social engagement; the contamination of architectural and urban design activity with other disciplines such as art, architectural history and theory, and sociology; the focus on public commissions rather than the private sector; the interpretation of architecture as a public service; and the design not so much of individual buildings as of social housing complexes, schools, civic centers, and other community facilities for the suburbs.

Historically, these practices have not gone unchallenged with the growth of the monopoly power of architects, developers and contractors, and the rise of architectural competitions, especially in the global North, which sought to elevate the figure of the “starchitect”, even more so after the neoliberal turn. Many of these initiatives were and are originally linked to left-wing political parties and social movements, and they sought to break with both the studio model (centered on the authorship and charisma of the individual architect) and the corporate architectural practices that proliferated in the Anglo-Saxon and North American post-war contexts and operate worldwide with today’s neoliberal globalization.

This Call for Papers invites contributions that critically reflect on some these initiatives, that include, but are not restricted to, cases such as:

- in Belgium, the Atelier de Recherche et d’Action Urbaines (from 1969);
- in France, the Atelier d’urbanisme et d’architecture (AUA, 1960–1986), the Atelier de Montrouge (1958– 1981), the Atelier de recherche et d’études d’aménagement (AREA),
- in Italy, the Società di Architettura e Urbanistica (SAU, 1957–1963), the Architetti Urbanisti Associati (AUA, 1961–1965); Studio STASS (1967–1975), the Studio ASSE (1967–1970), and the Collettivo di Architettura di Milano (1949–1973);
- in Spain, the Grup R (1951–1961) and the Taller de Arquitectura (from 1963);
- in Portugal, the Brigades SAAL Serviço Ambulatorio de Apoio Local (1974–1976);
- in Greece, the Atelier 66 (1965–1986),
- various cases in Uruguay, where civil servants, architects, and parliamentarians formed what became known as Team 10 in the mid-1960s and served as technical advisors in the creation of pioneering mutual aid cooperatives;
- In Brazil and France, the work of Sérgio Ferro and its impact inside and outside Brazil with the creation of contemporary assessorias técnicas such as Ambiente Arquitetura, Brasil Habitat, Integra Cooperativa, Fábrica Urbana, Peabiru TCA, Usina CTAH and Grão during the process of democratization since the 1980s.

Clara #12 therefore intends to study this phenomenon at a global level, including cases from different countries and cultural contexts in Europe, America, Africa and the Middle and Far East, in order to evaluate in particular the political, social and disciplinary issues that favored the creation of these associations; how they were collectively organized and managed; what were the links between these cooperative associations and the educational, political and social commitments of their members; what were the links between these organizations and the architectural and urban projects realized.

Although we are particularly interested in the cooperative design firms that emerged primarily in the thirty years following the end of World War II, a time when the association of architects and urban planners with

the political and social left ideals of communism and socialism was more intense, we are open to considering case studies from more recent times. In selecting and discussing contemporary case studies, we are interested not only in collective or anonymous design firms, but also in organizations that are programmatically experimenting with design at different scales, even integrating disciplines traditionally outside of architecture or urbanism.

Modalities

Proposals for contributions should be submitted to clara.archi@ulb.be by the 15th of December 2024 and must include an anonymized PDF file with:

- an abstract of 500 words,
- a proposed title.

In the e-mail only:

- the contributor(s)' name(s) and academic affiliation (if applicable),
- the contributor(s)' short bio(s) of maximum 100 words / author

Proposals for contributions may be submitted in English or in French.

Submission of abstracts : 15 December 2024.

Reference:

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