Architecture as an Interface Design Assignment

Following the above interest in user driven architecture, the authors of this paper (one having been educated as an archi-
teect at MIT, Boston, USA), who conducted a course called VA4585 and named "Interface Design" in Sabanci University, Istanbul, Turkey decided to create an assignment in which 3rd and 4th
year visual communication design students with no prior ar-
chitectural education must design architectural / urban inter-
faces as users of these. VA4585 is an introduction to the study
and design of interfaces in general. Students are expected to
submit various design projects in which they will be able to
test themselves in developing a set of user scenarios, in-
teraction models, navigational / flow diagrams and prototypes
for interactive applications. The learning objectives are:
constructing innovative ideas independent of physical, cultural,
and virtual constraints; and integrating daily life experience
into their design philosophy.

User experiences are highly appreciated in VA 325 course, in
which the main focus is designing user interfaces. The term
"user interface" includes the selection of methods, rules and
patterns of use typical of a physical / virtual system that pro-
vides the interaction between the user and what is used. The
graphical user interface of an operating system based on the
desktop metaphor, central panel of a washing machine, or
multitouch display of a mobile phone are just few examples
that most people encounter in daily life.

VA458 / Interface Design: Philosophy and Methodology of the Course

While the course is listed in the undergraduate program of Vi-
sual Arts and Communication Design (VACD) Program in
the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FAS), the content is ar-
ranged in such a diverse and interdisciplinary way that stu-
dents of any background in the university can take the course
and generate new ideas on subjects that they are not familiar
with professionally, but encounter and experience daily. This
is why the course does not have prerequisites and is open to
any student whether he or she studies design, management,
economics, cultural studies, engineering or any other field.

During the course, the concept of interface is presented as a
notion where each physical / intellectual tool — including door
handles, car dashboards, mobile devices, languages, sociol-
yogy, politics, communities, networks, etc. — has ways of com-
municating with users and other collectively or not, the sum
of all interaction methods for each tool can be considered as
an interface. The success of an interface is directly related to
the quality and ease of experience that it can provide, where
the level of satisfaction can change from person to person.
As a result, the most important and difficult part of designing an
interface is to anticipate the needs of users and to create a
suitable ground for the user experience.

As discussed earlier, the key to "user experience" is the
center of the course’s objectives. Topics are not focused on
graphical user interfaces or human-computer interaction (HCI)
as one would expect from a visual communication de-
sign program, but rather on personal observations and per-
ceptions, in their translation to the design platform. Along
with printed city maps, information graphics, data visualiza-
tions and social and web interfaces, subjects that require a differ-
cent level of specialization such as urban intervention, urban
design, and more and macro scale architecture are also in-
cluded in the course curriculum.

If we approach this inclusion from another point of view, con-
sidering architecture as an interface allows us to see that par-
ticipants involved in the process are not only designers (architec-
tors and users) (welsh) that the act of creation and the user
are another animates and creative participant in the formu-
lization of architecture: the building, sometimes reacting re-
to the other participants, sometimes acting independently
(Hill, 2002, p. 88). Some students who adopted this approach,
consciously or unconsciously, ended up with designs in which
buildings themselves were the main actors and were designed
to evolve by themselves taking advantage of the usage data
coming from dwellers.

Conclusion

Architecture today no longer be considered as a monu-
ment which smothered social life. The notion that architecture
is a means of controlling and permeating people in solitary
and inflexible permanent structures should be challenged in
today’s networked and fluid societies. Tensions for repression
through architecture must be challenged, and instead, resist-
ance must remain alive and regenerative through collabora-
tion. (Cowen, 2002, p. 10)

The architectural profession employs a machinic visual and
verbal language that ‘implies’ architecture of its implementa-
tion. The text suggests that the irruptual language of architectural
production and discourse can be dismantled and meant to in-
clude, and respond to, the signs of inhabitation [...] ‘The “Wapac”
architect, who questions and subverts the conventions, codes
and “laws” of architecture, is most likely to adjust the user and
transform architectural practice. (Hill, 2002, p. 19)

A very fresh example of this suggestion is the architecture
designed by non-architect individuals within the Second Life
environment. The main objective of making students study a
topic in which they are not educated is to foster multipurpose
awareness in the age of over-specialization. We do not nec-
essarily suggest a return to the old practice of user building
as a way of closing the gap between users and architecture.
Instead, the idea is to make people aware that they can con-
tribute to the evolution of architecture, which seems to be
awakeningly cultivated by technological advances. This
contribution can be realized by providing user data on how
architecture can be personalized and seeks to transform the
user in order to transform the design process. Farm follows
user.

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