

Building Blocks for Social Sustainability: **A Four-Day Design Workshop**

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Abstract

To sustain is to survive, and to survive as a community requires that class and racial differences, as well as spatial and perceptual distances are overcome by good will and good design. Since social sustainability is more of an enquiry than a definition, workshops such as the BBSS (Building Blocks for Social Sustainability) serve as an orientation device rather than a solution to a problem. Social sustainability ensures cohabitation and coexistence between all racial groups; thus this workshop aimed to accentuate cultural differences and similarities while enhancing mutual respect between communities of cultural diversity and environmental systems. The workshop targeted to explore the concept of social sustainability and to discover its placement concerning broader issues of sustainability. The four-day workshop took place in March 2013 at the Department of Architecture, University of Nicosia. This essay presents the philosophical premise, workshop process and product, as well as lessons learnt and future seeds for further development.

The workshop aimed to address the issue of social sustainability within a humanistic and cultural context, set on the platform of the built environment. Participants were called to consider matters of formal and informal urban structure, sense of community, social identity and ethics as those pertain to societal development in a diverse, multicultural setting. Operating under the premise that social sustainability can be attained through means of collaboration and common awareness, the workshop's findings aimed to activate urban spaces in a three-dimensional and temporal manner in order to induce values of social and egalitarian participation.

While particular attention was set on non-conventional means of visual expression, inquiries included the physical and metaphorical manifestation of conditions of social inclusion and exclusion, identifying physical elements or landmarks which, if removed would strip the area of its identity, its sense of place, traces of transculturation and others. Participants of this catalyst workshop have taken a multi-ethnic area of particular urban interest, analysed it as per its specific physical and social elements and were encouraged to invent a system, a process, a space, an object, a condition, or a circumstance that will act as a catalyst of social and spatial perception. Since enquiries and proposals were condensed within four working days, participants were compelled to exercise different design muscles than those used within the context of a semester- or year-long project. The final product was encouraged to include the invention of a new visual language for wayfinding, choreographing experiential activities, staging new urban functions, or designing interactive mobile systems, temporary or permanent structures and others. The aim of

this product was to challenge current cognitive perceptions and encourage social inclusion and sustainable communities.

Introduction

This BBSS workshop is classified by the University of Nicosia curriculum as a *catalyst* workshop because it occurs for a limited amount of days, and it aims to hone in on particular and unique skills, not usually encountered in the curriculum. Catalyst workshops take place twice a year, in the middle of the Fall and Spring semester respectively. At this time, students take time away from their scheduled classes and concentrate on a four- or five-day thematic workshop of their choice. Catalyst workshops are pre-approved by the department and maybe offered by any member of permanent faculty, adjunct faculty or design professional. The benefit of this educational scheme is three-fold: students are encouraged to acquire non-conventional skills that will enrich their architectural palettes. Secondly, students are compelled to complete a project in significantly shorter timeframe and thirdly, students have the opportunity to come into contact with specialists and instructors outside the department's faculty.

The participants were required to gather in groups of three or four, each group exploring a particular thematic topic. The final output required was two panels (A1 size) in portrait orientation, produced with any available media. The first panel should exhibit the group's site analysis findings and the second the design proposal. The format of the final output had to be maintained to facilitate future publications.

1. Philosophical Premise

The initial impetus for this workshop was the desire on behalf of the team of instructors to explore the much-elusive concept of social sustainability and to synthesize the diverse findings resulting from the different perspective of the four instructors. The interests and research areas of the instructors vary from participatory design, urban sustainability, industrial adaptive reuse, solar architecture and gendered spaces. A distinct overlap in the team's research areas is sustainability.

The amalgamation of the team's interests and sincere observations of some general trends among the student body yielded the framework for the workshop. Subsequently, two axes were laid down to set the direction for the workshop's targets:

- Address the concept of sustainability from a social perspective
- Reposition the role of the architect

Ultimately, the aim of the workshop is to encourage the creation of better places. In fact, one succinct definition of social sustainability is the craft of combining design of the physical realm with design of the social world for creating successful places that promote wellbeing by understanding what people need from the places they love and work.

1.1 Sustainability from a Social Perspective

It had been observed that architecture students who have completed the first year or two of study and are in the process of developing their own private architect's psyche, are often intimidated by tales of sustainability. Misconceptions are frequently added to the pot, creating even less favourable positions. Perhaps the greatest misreading sustainability needs to defend itself from is its presumed direct correlation to the natural environment. Students operate under the impression that if ecological dysfunction is addressed and tackled, happy communities will ensue. It was the intention of the instructing team to impart to participating students that sustainability is very much a social issue and is deeply connected to community consciousness.

The workshop aimed at providing an amenable introduction of sustainability in all its broad implications, and thus to demystify it by breaking down certain stereotypical connection such as linking sustainability to photovoltaics or recycled concrete.

1.2 Repositioning the Role of the Architect

Another observation shared among the instructing team - two members of which have graduated from their studies within the last five years - is the architecture student's preoccupation with the grandiose architectural product. The culture of the architect as the genius, the hero, the master builder, is easily contracted by young, impressionable minds. This condition quite frequently acts as an obstacle towards producing meaningful spaces that are sustainable in their longevity, their contribution towards social interaction and their synergy with the natural environment.

It must be noted that currently, many architecture schools have shifted towards cross- and multi-disciplinary teaching methods that encourage students to acquire a more global perspective that allows them to position themselves in a healthier stance with respect to global circumstances and to their peers. Nevertheless, defining the successful architect as the one who produces high profile, high-budget projects is still quite prominent among professional and academic strata.

The workshop aimed at introducing the notion of the architect as the facilitator or coordinator, rather than the all-knowing expert. The facilitator is keen to help community members express their own ideas and desire about their living spaces (both public and private), rather than educate them on the better ideas. The facilitator will then collect these ideas, and by utilizing his or her academic expertise, will produce a design, and ultimately a built project, that will satisfy the community's needs for better living.

Two particular elements of the workshop allowed for the participants to practice the role of the facilitator: one was its brevity and the other was the fact that the participants were to work in groups, rather than on their own. The short time allowed for the workshop – four days in total – made it less conducive for long exercises in form finding, that sometimes lead the well-intentioned architect astray from the real issues and the complexities of the project program. Group work also lends itself toward the skills of facilitating and coordinating. Not only is there a better possibility

of constant flow of creativity, there is the inherent condition where the team members need to be well coordinated and respectful of each other in order to for the team to reach optimum results.

2. Teaching Methodology

After initial introductions, the participants were informed to the workshop aims in a format and language that was simple and straightforward in order to make them comprehensible and easy to recall.

- ‘- We will learn how to take on an area of historical interest and multiethnic profile and devise ways to make all inhabitants (temporary and long-term) gain a sense of spatial and physical inclusion
- We will invent and/or choreograph structures, systems, actions and/or narratives whose purpose will be to energize city hotspots
- We will aim to accentuate cultural differences and similarities while enhancing mutual respect between communities of cultural diversity’

2.1 The Site

It was decided early on in the preparation of the workshop brief, that the students would be provided with a site. The prerequisites for the site selection were that it be urbanistically diverse so that all participants would have the opportunity to explore a group’s particular interests. Also, it was important that the chosen site offer the challenge of multiple layers of history and human ecosystems.

The area chosen is the inner city of Nicosia that lies within the Venetian walls. Following a military incursion from Turkey in 1974, the city has been divided in two parts approximately equal in area, with a United Nations administered buffer zone in the middle, running from east to west. It is a site rich in commercial and residential activity, with a large number of craft shops and small-scale industries such as carpentries, car-repair workshops etc. The area remains active for approximately twelve hours daily, on weekdays and on weekends. The residential units accommodate low to middle income and house mostly immigrant workers. Several buildings are listed and new construction is highly regulated. As a result of its multicultural and long history, the walled city of Nicosia, is well known for its romanticized atmosphere and attracts a large number of tourists on a regular basis.

2.2 Workshop Process

Part of the workshop’s success is owed to the fact that schedules were promptly kept on behalf of the participants and the instruction team. The total number of participating students was 27. The ratio of student to instructor was 1:7 and it proved quite conducive to a productive studio culture.

The workshop’s schedule ran as follows: the first half of the first day, students were required to follow two introductory lectures and watch Garry Hustwit’s film *Urbanised*. During the second half of the day participants were to settle into groups of three or four and visit the site. On the second day students presented their project concentration and design proposal and spent the day working on site analysis. On the

third day, participants were expected to work on their design intervention and the fourth day was dedicated to panel preparation. At the end of the fourth day, all projects were presented to peers, faculty and guests.

2.2.1 Day One

The first half of the first day was spent addressing the theoretical premise of the workshop. At the University of Nicosia, issues of sustainable design are first introduced to the academic curriculum in the fourth year of architectural studies. Since most participants in the BBSS workshop were in their third year of studies, compressing a comprehensive introduction to sustainability and then branching off to matters of social sustainability was a significant challenge.

First Lecture: Introduction to Subject

The first of the two lectures aimed to explain the key concept of social sustainability, while at the same time, position it in the broader spectrum of sustainability. Firstly, definitions were set forth, and an attempt was made at distinguishing between the terms *green*, *ecological* and *sustainable*. It was then crucial to link these terms to issues of architecture, urbanism and regional design. Sustainability was then linked to the components of economy, community and environment, pointing out that sustainability needs to employ all three in equal measure.

Following this general introduction, the term social sustainability was discussed at some length. Participants were encouraged to consider examples from their own residential environment. Overall, matters of social isolation and spatial exclusion were discussed more enthusiastically than other topics.

Other issues discussed were:

- Sense of community identity and belonging
- Tolerance and respect
- Engagement with people from different cultures, background and beliefs
- Friendly, co-operative behaviour in neighbourhoods
- Opportunities for cultural, leisure, community, sport and other activities
- Low levels of crime and anti-social behaviour with visible, effective, community-friendly policing.

Each group was advised to choose one of four themes to tackle. Since social sustainability is such a wide-ranging issue, the four themes were introduced as a more tangible vehicle for participants to express their intensions. The topics, inspired from the publication *Design for Social Sustainability, A Framework for Creating Thriving New Communities* (Woodcraft et al, 2011), are purposefully wide and overlapping so that they do not limit or compartmentalise creativity.

I. Amenities and social infrastructure

This theme involved issues such as safety and well-lit open spaces. Jane Jacobs' notion of "eyes on the street" was discussed at length. Participants discussed the potential of community assets such as shops, food production, gardens and buildings

as well as good transportation systems and communication connections. In this theme the subject of maintenance in public spaces was explored.

Case studies presented for this theme included a project in a Brazilian favela where a group of architecture students designed a “public space canopy kit” that the community can assemble in less than four hours to create shaded spaces.

II. Social and cultural life

In the context of the second theme, community groups, neighborhood networks (e.g. babysitting circles, lift share schemes) and matters of local identity (e.g. street parties, distinctive architecture) were discussed. The case study presented was the “Walk [Your City]” project, where urban designer Matt Tomasulo instigated the posting of low-budget signs informing citizens walking distance between city landmarks (formal and informal ones).

III. Voice and influence

During the presentation of this theme, issues of creative community engagement and participatory decision-making were discussed. The case study shown, which addressed the issue of community engagement, was a project in Brighton, UK, where a simple scheme was employed by the community to monitor daily energy use. The average monthly electricity use of Tidy Street was documented graphically by a local artist on the middle of the asphalt, along the entire length of the street. Every week, the residents’ power consumption was recorded and documented on the asphalt graph. These made the residents actively aware of their consumption and prompted them to make changes in their lifestyle in order to effectively minimize their daily electricity consumption. At the end of the month, a considerable decrease in electricity consumption was achieved (and graphed on the asphalt). This project exemplified the positive impact a visible target can have in a community.

IV. Space to grow

The fourth theme was intended to stir ideas on flexible infrastructure and planning. In spite of the fact that the built environment seems ostensibly static, the community that inhabits it needs to maintain a dynamic potential to grow and adapt. An important parameter to consider is the interstitial spaces, described in class as ‘meanwhile spaces,’ exist between the formal public spaces and the decidedly private ones. These spaces, sometimes overlooked by the real estate market, present a unique opportunity for creativity because the rules and surveillance either do not apply to them or they are distinctly different to conventional public spaces. Another factor in allowing a community space to grow is a systematic approach to dispensing news and other information relevant to the on-goings of the community. Neighbourhood websites, a network of locations for community boards, frequent newsletters are three examples of such approaches.

The case study shown was related to the notion of meanwhile spaces. It is an annual project called PARK(ing) Day, which originated in California and has gradually

become a global event. On the third Saturday of each September, citizens, artists and activists collaborate to temporarily transform metered parking places and offering them for public use. The intension of this project is to call attention to the need for more open spaces and to improve the quality of living spaces.

Second Lecture: Introduction to Site

The second lecture delivered by a member of the instructing team, presented a comprehensive introduction to the physical, infrastructural, cultural and historical characteristics of the walled city of Nicosia. The presentation was visually powerful as well as informative and it provided the participants, some of which from other cities and other countries, a rich visual library and a wealth of material to draw inspiration from.

Images included land use maps, infrastructural patters, mapping of temporal uses and events of cultural significance, demographics, open spaces and green spaces, etc. Some of the information imparted was also through interpretive sketching on urban design principles. Development of the area was shown through progressive mappings that covered a range of around one hundred years.

2.2.2 Day Two

The majority of the day was spent in discussion of relevant issues in small groups and on a one-to-one basis, which proved beneficial in allowing participants to internalise theoretical perspectives. Subsequently, participants were encouraged to personalise the concept of sustainability and invent their own definitions and design direction. Groups presented their site analysis findings to the instructing team and discussed reasons for choosing a particular theme. Group projects included topics such as issues of street safety and lighting design (image 1), digital broadcasts (image 2), mediating spatial isolation (image 3), multi-ethnic food markets, environmental awareness and others.

In terms of production, groups were advised to spend the day on formatting their site analysis findings and arranging them in a legible and constructive manner. At the end of the day, each group was expected to print a draft copy of their first panel to be presented the following day.

2.2.3 Day Three

The day began by a pin-up presentation of all draft panels on site analysis. The instructing team and the participants offered constructive comments on the context of the site analysis, its applicability to the design proposal and on the legibility of the panel. The rest of the day was spent on designing interventions. Time was set aside to make necessary amendments to the site analysis panel.

2.2.4 Day Four

Participants continued working on their design proposal, concentrating on the layout of the second panel. Since the Catalyst Presentation was scheduled for 7pm in the evening, there was no room for extensions and participants were compelled to work

with remarkable efficiency. Projects were to be concluded at 4pm, so as to allow two hours for printing and preparing for the Presentation event.

In order to facilitate the final output process, one of the instructors undertook the task of printing all panels. This was helpful in avoiding plotter congestion and malfunction, which is a frequent occurrence among architecture students. The same instructor was also responsible for preparing all panels in electronic order so that they may be projected during the Presentation event. Another instructor was in charge of preparing each group's verbal presentation. Groups were required to choose a group speaker and each speaker was required to prepare a description of their project that consisted of only two sentences. This was not an easy task to complete. Another instructor took over organising the participants while they pinned up their final printed panels.

The Catalyst Presentation event commenced on time, and after a brief introduction by one of the instructors, the participants presented their projects eloquently and proficiently. All projects were well received and the workshop was concluded with a few hours of relaxed celebrations.

3. Lessons Learnt

Although the workshop outcome was regarded as a success both in the quality of the final product and in the dedication exhibited by the participants, several elements can afford to be revised and improved, should the opportunity to repeat the workshop present itself.

One element worth improving is the diversity of media used during the design investigation. Most participants used software means, few used sketching and hardly any used model-making or other media. A reason for this is a prominent misconception among the architecture students at the University of Nicosia that models need to be pristine in order to exhibit the finished product. Working models, although popular among some students, tend to be avoided by most when there is tight schedule to be observed. In future workshops time will be set aside at the start of the second day of the workshop for some conceptual model-making. Materials can be collected by the participants after their site visit on the first day and they will be required to create models in the span of maximum two hours. This will allow the project to be considered as a three-dimensional, tactile proposal that will inform and enrich the final product.

Another improvement is the encouragement of innovation in the strategies employed by the participants in their solutions. It was observed among the instructing team that the outcome of solutions was at times, more or less, formulaic. A consideration would be to introduce a stronger theoretical premise, with more emphasis on more involved methods of uncovering the spatial issues of the users.

Conclusion

The diversity of interests and administrative strengths among the instructing team proved to be valuable in the efficiency of the workshop and should be a serious consideration when a workshop of similar parameters is being planned. Instructors played to their strengths in matters of strategizing, organizing, technical support. On a theoretical level, the participants benefitted from the contribution of a researcher in urban sustainability, human comfort, industrial heritage, solar architecture and development of interstitial spaces. The participants also benefitted from the local knowledge of the instructors of the walled city of Nicosia and experience with regulations regarding the built environment.

The greatest challenge of the workshop was for participants and instructors to negotiate the issues of a broad theoretical premise and tackle matters of scale in the span of four days. The selection of theoretical axes imparted to the participants as well as key associations proved to be crucial. One example of a decisive association is that sustainability is associated with social welfare as much as it is with environmental ethics. Another association is that a sustainable building has to be 'green' but a 'green' building is not necessarily sustainable.

At the conclusion of the workshop, the participants were infused with a significant dosage of ideas on sustainability, which they were able to apply through efficient time management and constrictive group work. In the participants' following year of study, they will have to follow a semester-long course on history and theory of sustainable architecture, a course on sustainable building practices and the choice of a year-long studio in sustainable design: this catalyst workshop aims to prepare ground.

Reference List

Woodcraft, S., Bacon, N., Caistor-Arendar, L., Hackett, T., (2011) *Design for Social Sustainability, A Framework for Creating Thriving New Communities*, 2nd edition, London: Young Foundation