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ArchéA
Architectural
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Arrangement

IO3
2021

Manual of best practices for a blended flexible training activity in architecture for higher education institutions

UNIVERSITÀ DI PARMA
DIA Dipartimento di Ingegneria e Architettura

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This volume returns the results of the Intellectual Output 03 of the research project "ArchéA. Architectural European Medium-sized City Arrangement", with the aim of analyzing and restating the state of the art achieved in the field of flexible mixed training in architecture, strongly encouraged by the emergency period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The result is a collection of good practices carried out internally and externally to the ArchéA partner network, in the context of higher education institutions, made possible by new virtual tools capable of mediating teaching and mixed and flexible learning around the disciplines related to the project.

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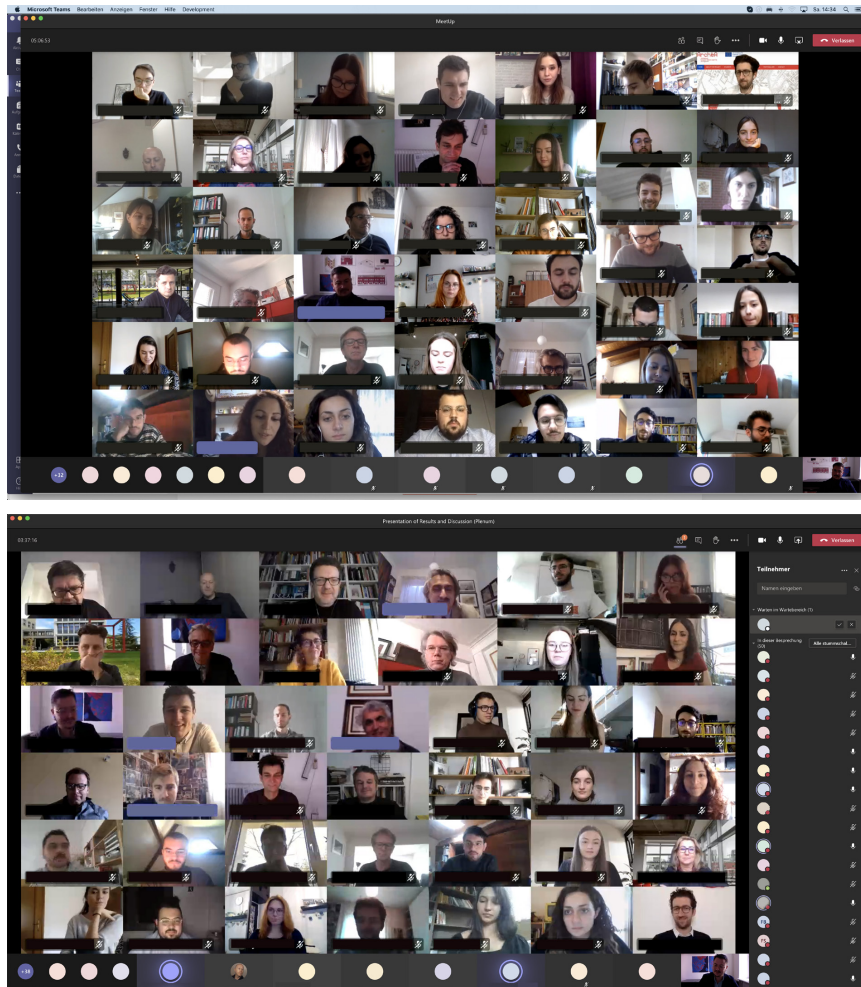
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Fig.01 Workspace during the workshop in Cesena in November 2019
Fig.02 Final presentation of the design workshops results and projects in Cesena in November 2019

Timo Steinmann
**Design in the Time of Corona
An Experience Report**

RWTH Aachen, Germany

How does blended teaching and working function in formats that actually thrive on community, teamwork and lively exchange in person? This text addresses the insights gained from the organization and implementation of the *ArchéA* research project's design workshop in Aachen in November 2020.

I. The ArchéA Project

The *ArchéA* project—Architectural European Medium-Sized City Arrangement—is the product of a cooperation between five European universities that each pursue different research approaches to mapping urban space. As exemplary case studies, two medium-sized European cities—Aachen and Bologna—were mapped according to the different approaches of the participating partner universities. As the project progressed, the mapping methods were developed and refined further; a specially created online course will allow the findings to be disseminated to students of all participating universities in the future. By the same token, the tools and methods developed were tested as strategies for the development of new spatial solutions during the two international design workshops and presented, discussed, and thematically expanded in the context of several—originally planned as local—events. The *ArchéA* project thus incorporates various teaching and research formats, envisaged as a mixture of conventional and blended learning methods, even before COVID-19. The design workshops, however, which were conceived as teaching events, were intended to be in-person events, as meetings for the various partners and international students and to promote exchange between them.

II. Analog Methods—Before COVID-19

The first workshop within the *ArchéA* research project took place in Bologna and Cesena in November 2019. This was still in an analog format. The students and teachers of the partner institutions traveled to Bologna and Cesena. Guest speakers gave lectures at an introductory event at the university. Afterwards there was the possibility to visit the historical old town of Bologna as well as the project area to be planned. After the weekend in Bologna, the event moved to Cesena. There, the teams sat together at workbenches in the studio and were able to work together on the plans and on the model. A large working model was created in which all the designs could be inserted. Guest critics came for the final presentation, all the plans were printed out in large format and the designs were presented to a large group.

III. Digital Methods—During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the premise of the event from the ground up. Due to the local situation in Germany, as well as for all partners involved, an in-person meeting in Aachen was not conceivable. The lockdown had Europe firmly in its grip, so a way needed to be found to hold a design workshop with about twenty-five students and teaching staff from five different European universities in a digital format, without foregoing the lively and productive atmosphere that such a week of design usually thrives on, including the lively exchange between students and the encounter between diverse attitudes and positions.

Since the use of video conferencing and various other established programs on the market had already been trialed in teaching and university communications since the beginning of the

pandemic in March 2020, the decision was made to arrange the event on the MS Teams platform. The idea was to handle all communication via this platform, as well as any data exchange, in order to create a small, self-contained cosmos over the duration of the one-week workshop in which all participants could meet and exchange ideas.

The platform included separate, exclusive group workspaces for the teams from the participating partner institutions, where the individual working groups could exchange ideas during their daily design work via video calls, in addition to sharing their findings and work samples with each other. Furthermore, there was a general accessible area that was intended as an open forum for exchange between the groups; the opening and closing events also took place here, as well as interim presentations of the designs.

In order to ensure a certain amount of lively exchange, a daily final meeting was scheduled.

attend the event in Aachen in person.

The shift from the analog to the digital world was more problematic in the context of everyday workshop life and teamwork. While the individual groups of the partner universities managed to distribute the work within their teams and to work together to varying degrees—the partners from Bologna and Parma even had the opportunity to work together as a team in the same place; the other teams, in which the participants sat alone at home, had to rely entirely on digital communication and exchange—the communication among all participants was lethargic and not as originally hoped or planned.

In the obligatory daily meetings, it was already difficult to get the participants to even turn on their camera in order to participate visually in the conversation. Then, as soon as the cameras were active, the problem with digital formats in an event intended for lively exchange and direct

Conclusion

The event, "forced" into a digital format by the severe restrictions of the pandemic, showed that there are few alternatives to face-to-face exchange and work in design. However, a week of intensive work, such as this workshop, can certainly be complemented by digital formats, with a hybrid—partly digital, partly analog—approach leading to clear advantages. Working and designing itself function much better in person, while digital formats offer the possibility of making presentations and interim meetings, even with additional guests and the like, greatly simplified and possible without any logistical effort, even at short notice.

In summary, high-quality and profound results in terms of content are possible, scientific and academic exchange is feasible, but the additional benefits such meetings offer for participants, such as interpersonal social exchange and the broadening of horizons, remain almost completely behind the screens.

Fig.03 Excitement and uncertainty at the beginning of the digital workshop "in Aachen" in November 2020
Fig.04 Cheerfulness at the final event of the digital workshop in November 2020

This was obligatory for all workshop participants and was intended to present the findings and results of the day. Interim designs were presented, and any identified problems or analyses of the planning area were discussed.

IV. Problems and Advantages of Digital Formats
The opening event on the first day took place digitally as a video conference with consecutive presentations by guest speakers and the organizers. For this event, the move to a digital format was unproblematic and posed no issues. The final event was held in the same way, where the digital format meant that guests could be added again at short notice. For both events, it was also now possible to invite guests who would not have been able to

collaboration became clear: like Saint Jerome in his study, all the participants were now isolated in their rooms and could not participate fully.

The willingness to join conversations, to participate, was almost non-existent, both among the students and the teachers; there was hardly any interaction, even after prompting.

Particularly noteworthy is the obvious:
Due to the distance and exclusive contact via video calls, there was no sense of community or togetherness. Neither a group dynamic nor interpersonal relationships via established acquaintances within the partner universities could develop—even getting to know each other digitally and forced conversations could not change this.

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