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Theme: Identities and the Cities: Urban Transformations, Transition and Change in Urban Image Construction

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CRAFT – an EU Strategic Partnership that works with the History, Heritage and Urban Change of Venice

Abstract

In CRAFT we work with a new interdisciplinary educational concept focusing on the cross-examinations of traditions of sitting; investigating the comparative historical, cultural and metaphorical differences, the chair embodies as artefact and functional object. We decided to work with Venice as context focusing on how a historic city identity is made, used and abused, imagined and narrated, and invited 30 international students to participate at a Session at the Art Biennale. In collaboration with experts in the fields of cultural heritage, art, architecture, design and history, the students developed more than 500 posters focusing on the cultural heritage of the chair, specifically the Monobloc chair, and the traditions of sitting, in the context of Venice.

Cultural heritage is a complex matter, to use a concise definition it is the value of the past that we distinguish in the present in order to be able to preserve it for the future. It is our thesis that design is the engineering of the Humanities - and in CRAFT, we investigate the chair as a transcultural design discourse, and, importantly, we investigate if the chair has contributed to the urban transformations, transition and changes in the urban image construction.

In an increasingly globalized world, human beings are becoming more citizens of the world than citizens of the cities, at the same time the increasing mobility creates a universalized urban functionality. In this regard, we find that the anonymous chair, the Monobloc, has a unique role in the world heritage creating a tie between different cultures. Our paper focus on how the research on cultural identities of the city, and we question the various transitional processes affecting identities in the urban context in its global-regional-national-local interplay.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, interdisciplinary approaches and methodologies, urban transformations, Monobloc chair, design

Introduction

In the Erasmus+ project CRAFT, we work with a new interdisciplinary educational concept focusing on the cross-examinations of traditions of sitting; investigating the comparative historical, cultural and metaphorical differences the chair embodies as artefact and functional object.

In one of our cases, we decided to work with Venice as context focusing on how a historic city identity is made, used and abused, imagined and narrated, and invited 30 international students to participate at a

Session at the Art Biennale. In collaboration with experts in the fields of cultural heritage, art, architecture, design and history, over a workshop of 6 days the students developed more than 500 posters focusing on the cultural heritage of the chair, specifically the Monobloc chair and the traditions of sitting in the context of Venice.

Cultural heritage is a complex matter; to use a concise definition it is the value of the past that we distinguish in the present in order to be able to preserve it for the future. It is our thesis that design is the engineering of the Humanities - and in CRAFT, we investigate the chair as a transcultural design discourse. Most importantly, we investigate if the chair has contributed to the urban transformations, transition and changes in the urban image construction.

In an increasingly globalized world, human beings are becoming more citizens of the world than citizens of the cities, at the same time the increasing mobility creates a universalized urban functionality. In this regard, we find that the 'anonymous' chair, the Monobloc, has a unique role in the world heritage creating a tie between different cultures. Our paper focuses on the research on cultural identities of the city, and we question the various transitional processes affecting identities in the urban context in its global-regional-national-local interplay.

CRAFT

CRAFT is an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project, which takes on the aim of the European Year of Cultural Heritage (2018) where the slogan was: *Our heritage: where the past meets the future*. The focus of the European Year of Cultural Heritage was to encourage more people to discover and engage with Europe's cultural heritage, and to reinforce a sense of belonging to a common European space. In Europe, there is a common cultural heritage worth remembering, (re)discovering and be aware of. In a world where cultural diversity is increasing, the shared cultural heritage is a tool to promote intercultural understanding and create relations between identities, representations and performances of history (European Commission, 2019). In CRAFT we attempt to reach this aim by connecting higher educational institutions with cultural institutions and companies.

CRAFT represents five European countries and works in interdisciplinary, new and innovative ways with the goal of encouraging more people to discover and engage with Europe's cultural heritage. Furthermore, CRAFT aims to teach new generations of young people about cultural heritage by developing and implementing a new Joint Multidisciplinary Curriculum, providing them with the relevant and high-quality skills and competencies needed to meet the expectations of the changing labour market. In CRAFT, we work with a new interdisciplinary educational concept, focusing on the cross-examinations of the cultural heritage of the chair and traditions of sitting; investigating the comparative historical, cultural and metaphorical differences, the chair embodies as a pleasurable, artistic-playful artefact and socio-functional crafted object. Six partners have come together with support from the EU Erasmus+ Programme. Leading the project is Aalborg University from Denmark, with partners: Design Studio Hans Thyge & Co from Denmark, Universidad de Oviedo from Spain, Universidade de Aveiro from Portugal, the theatre Associazione Marchigiana attivita' Teatrali – AMAT from Italy and Univerza V Ljubljani from Slovenia.

Context & Approaches

The five-day workshop facilitated by CRAFT at the 2019 Art Biennale in Venice, where 50 students and teachers from across Europe were gathered to join and develop an extraordinary and innovative teaching module was our first large scale interdisciplinary event.

The city of Venice is of great importance in relation to CRAFT and the project's focus - the chair. Not only does Venice bring history, design, food, architecture and art into the project, the city can also be

regarded as a massive legacy of cultural heritage, that in one way or another represents the overall aim of CRAFT and our common shared heritage. Venice symbolizes and embraces everything the project CRAFT search and aims for and in that sense, then what better way for the CRAFT project to exhibit, than at the Art Biennale in Venice. Furthermore, the title and approach of the 2019 Art Biennale, resonated very well with the aim and focus of CRAFT. The title, "*May you live in interesting times*" is a phrase of English invention that has long been mistakenly cited as an ancient Chinese curse that invokes periods of uncertainty, crisis and turmoil; "interesting times", exactly as the ones we live in today. The curator of the exhibition, Ralph Rugoff, explains:

"The 58th International Art Exhibition will not have a theme per se, but will highlight a general approach to making art and a view of art's social function as embracing both pleasure and critical thinking. [...] Artists who think in this manner offer alternatives to the meaning of so-called facts by suggesting other ways of connecting and contextualising them. [...] *May You Live in Interesting Times* will aim to welcome its public to an expansive experience of the deep involvement, absorption and creative learning, which art makes possible. This will entail engaging visitors in a series of encounters that are essentially playful, considering, that it is when we play that we are most fully 'human.' This will mean tweaking aspects of the Exhibition format where possible to make sure they are sympathetically aligned with the character of the art being presented." (Rugoff, 2019)

This approach to art emphasis on art's social function as embracing both pleasure and critical thinking. It is an approach that lends a great underlying framework for investigating the chair as a transcultural design discourse. Therefore, during the workshop, the focus was both on Rugoff's curatorial theme and on cultural heritage as the participants investigated the Monobloc chair. They focused on how the Monobloc might have contributed to the urban transformations, transition and changes in the urban image construction of a city like Venice.

To provide the participants with an ambitious learning method and context during the workshop, the pedagogical approach used was Problem-Based Learning (PBL). Problem-based learning is a highly nationally and internationally recognized as an advanced and efficient learning model and study method and it was one of the building stones from the beginning of Aalborg University's history and the university has proudly and competently developed and carried this into the new millennium (Booklet, 260-261).

Problem-based learning is a method to organize the learning process in such a manner that students are actively engaged in finding answers themselves (Graaf and Kolmos, 2007). According to Professor Anette Kolmos and MSO Erik de Graaff (2007) from Aalborg University, problem-based learning is defined by open-ended and ill-structured problems that provide a context for learning.

The Problem-based learning approach focuses on projects that through group work relates to real-life problems and secures the student projects to follow an ongoing cycle of development, implementation, execution and evaluation throughout the project period. The problem-based learning approach provides the students to collaborate with external partners and practitioners, giving the students unique possibilities to transform ideas and thought to action(s) in real life (Aalborg University 2015) (Tvedebrink et al., 2019).

At the workshop and session at the Art Biennale 2019, the problem-based learning methodology allowed the students to follow the problem-based learning cycle, with the theme of the Monobloc and the context of Venice constant in play in the development of concepts for new posters. A methodology securing flexible interaction between theory and practice. Further, it provided the students with new collaborative and communicative competencies, learning skills and real-life experiences beneficial for future scientific and practical work (Tvedebrink et al., 2019).

The Monobloc

In Craft, we work as mentioned with a new interdisciplinary educational concept, focusing on the cross-examinations of traditions of sitting; investigating the comparative historical, cultural and metaphorical differences the chair embodies as artefact and functional object. The focus is on the chair as a type of object with a cultural significance, capable of revealing differences and connections between several cultures (Fisker & Christensen, 2019).

In the project phase executed in Venice in 2019, we chose the Monobloc. The Monobloc is a chair known in every corner of the world, despite the ubiquity of the white plastic; it can be regarded as an item that is completely without context; the chair that no-one notices but, when thinking back, all remember seeing in cafes, schools, beaches, hospitals and in our neighbour's garden.

The Monobloc has been subject to varieties of comments through its existence; it has provoked both positive and negative reactions throughout the world. Hence, it has become part of a specific cultural heritage and a key element in a series of social encounters worldwide. Further, the Monobloc has due to its ubiquity and anonymity, been the subject for multiple playful and sculptural transformations by different artists and designers around the world. Transformations, which despite their playful and sculptural character, perhaps further presents a critical thinking on contemporary societies and/or social relations? The Monobloc is an object that is cheap to acquire while at the same time identifiable to people in every corner of the world, where its anonymity apparently both frustrates and inspires. The Monobloc is, according to The New York Times, "The world's most famous chair" (Rawthor, 2007).

For our work in relation to the art Biennale in Venice in 2019 it is this unique and complex dichotomy of the Monobloc – the ubiquity coupled with the anonymity - that makes it a specifically interesting focal point to investigate the chair as a transcultural design discourse. No matter where you are in the world, you would in some way have established an acquaintanceship with this chair, which means that the Monobloc is an object that we all have a relationship to and thereby it brings all of us closer together. While the anonymous nature of its design lends us the possibility to use it as an almost blank canvas upon which we can experiment, transform and discuss, which made it an excellent object for the event in Venice.

It is our thesis that the Monobloc provides us with common conditions and background allowing us to understand, perceive and talk about several phenomena with basis in this chair across different cultures and generations. Do chairs make us human? This was one of the questions that were brought up. Perhaps, was the answer, one thing we agreed on was that a chair never is just an object for sitting. Therefore, in the increasingly globalized world, where human beings are becoming more citizens of the world than citizens of the cities, we find that the 'anonymous' chair, the Monobloc, has a unique role in the world heritage creating a tie between different cultures.

Throughout the five-day workshop, the students creatively played with the scale, form and function of the Monobloc chair. They endeavoured into critical explorations of the chair and its contemporary context. They used this lens to discuss and reflect on the historical context of Venice and its current cultural discourses (Tvedebrink et al., 2019).

The Workshop, the Monobloc, the Discourse

During the workshop, the students and teachers joined in a series of creative, innovative and co-creative analogue and digital research exercises to discover, analyse, transform, and produce their own contextualised designs and key features of the Monobloc. Students were divided into six different groups, all working interdisciplinary with an overall theme of the Monobloc and of Venice. Each group was tasked with first situating the Monobloc into a specific and carefully chosen space and context within Venice given by the supervisor of the group who was thus responsible for introducing the students to their contextual framework. Nevertheless, throughout the workshop, all project partners circulated around the six groups to supervise and provide feedback for all to emphasize the interdisciplinary approach of the project (Tvedebrink et al., 2019).

To optimise the input of the workshop, every day, lectures were given within the theme of CRAFT, Cultural Heritage, Venice and the Monobloc. Different lecturers, professors or experts conducted the lectures. The students were asked to communicate their findings for an audience at the Art Biennale through a series of A3 posters in Sale d'Armi at the Arsenale. The task for the groups was to provide as many posters as possible each day. On the final day of the workshop, the room was set up to present all the posters, in a way that mapped out the progress, the creative process as well as showing the results of the intense group work. For this part of the workshop, it was possible for visitors to walk into the room to begin to discuss and understand the overall mission and ideas. The workshop culminated not just with the mentioned public exhibition of the work but also a performance by the participating students facilitated by the contemporary dance company 7-8 Chili. The 45-minute performance took point of departure in the cultural heritage of the chair, more specifically the Monobloc as the main object, removing all barriers between humans, developing a new common language through the Monobloc chair. The performance group supervised the students by training, dancing with, developing, guiding and supervising the students into a performance that took departure in the Chair contributing with new aspects of our multidisciplinary curriculum (Tvedebrink et al., 2019).

Creative exploration and critical reflection are essential elements at the Venice Art Biennale. In CRAFT, we embraced this perspective with an interdisciplinary and problem-based educational concept, training students to critically and creatively describe, exemplify, evaluate and communicate issues of cultural heritage (Tvedebrink et al., 2019). Students took a point of departure in the cross-examinations of the cultural heritage of the chair and the traditions of sitting within the context of the city of Venice this by investigating the comparative historical, cultural and metaphorical differences the chair embodies as a pleasurable, artistic-playful artefact and socio-functional crafted object. Emphasizing the unique and complex dichotomy of the Monobloc, the chosen chair was investigated as a vehicle for a transcultural design discourse, and how it might contribute to the urban transformations, transition and changes in the urban image construction of a city like Venice.

The workshop produced an overwhelming series of posters with many great visual presentations and graphic illustrations. Many posters displayed engaged in topics like human relationships, personal space, loneliness, climate and capitalism through brilliant use of wordplay, metaphors and analogies (Tvedebrink et al., 2019).

The posters were emotionally effective and with a very creative use of the Monobloc chairs to raise critical, daring, provocative and even satirical comments on contemporary society and societal issues, and shoved an overall focus on the various transitional processes affecting identities in the urban context in its global-regional-national-local interplay. Hence, applying political and socio-cultural reflection on the interplay between historic sites, cultural heritage and today's increasing tourism contributing to the growing problems of plastic littering and mass-production all around us. In the end, we are proud to see how, not only the entire workshop but also, each poster represents a continuous oscillation between analysis and design thinking and contribute to broaden our understanding of cultural heritage by challenging the borders of the experienced, the remembered and the imagined (Tvedebrink et al., 2019).

Concluding Thoughts

In the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership CRAFT we explore the chair and its archetypal-typological credibility in representing transcultural concepts in spatial design, human comfort, materials technology, structural design and construction. It is a project with a process linked through contemporary interpretations and responses to our shared cultural heritage (Fisker & Christensen, 2019).

Cultural heritage is a complex matter, but to use one definition, it is the value of the past that we distinguish in the present in order to be able to preserve it for the future. It is our thesis that design is the engineering of the Humanities - and in CRAFT we investigate the chair as a transcultural design discourse. This discourse was the main question for 50 students, teachers and cultural actors gathered for an intense 6-day workshop at the 2019 Art Biennale in Venice. The interdisciplinary group came together

up with answers on the transformations, possibilities and discussions of the Monobloc. The Monobloc, despite the ubiquity of the white plastic can be regarded as an item that is completely without context. In this regard, we found that this anonymous, but globally omnipresent, chair has a unique role in the world heritage, and offers a perfect starting point to create a tie between different cultures and generations and a rediscovering of shared cultural heritage.

Through an interdisciplinary and problem-based educational approach, the group of students were asked to critically and creatively describe, exemplify, evaluate and communicate issues of cultural heritage. The students took point of departure in the cross-examinations of the cultural heritage of the chair and the traditions of sitting within the context of the city of Venice by investigating the comparative historical, cultural and metaphorical differences the chair embodies as a pleasurable, artistic-playful artefact and socio-functional crafted object. Emphasizing the unique and complex dichotomy of the Monobloc, the chair was investigated as a vehicle for a transcultural design discourse, and how it might contribute to the urban transformations, transition and changes in the urban image construction of a city like Venice.

Producing an overwhelming amount of posters throughout the six days, the students engaged with very interesting topics as well as they raised critical, daring, provocative and even satirical comments on contemporary society and societal issues, and shoved an overall focus on the various transitional processes affecting identities in the urban context in its global-regional-national-local interplay.

We can also conclude that collaboration with an artistic performance group brought new aspects and disciplines to the CRAFT project. Their inputs, insights and practical exercises provided the students with the opportunity to become deeply focused in new possibilities and understandings. It also showed new nuances to their knowledge and understanding and provided everyone to experience the Monobloc through the eyes interdisciplinary work.

In CRAFT we have investigate the chair as a transcultural design discourse, the results of the workshop showed that the chair throughout history has signified extraordinary cultural relations. Using the Monobloc and situating the chair in the Venetian context invited for many different bodily encounters, it defined new habits and reflected various perspectives on individual personal space.

We can presume that the research on cultural identities of the city, were we have questioned the various transitional processes affecting identities in the urban context in its global-regional-national-local interplay, can be influenced by a teaching and learning experiment engaging in a series of interdisciplinary and intercultural collaborations. All with the purpose to test what happens with the perception of art and cultural heritage when the boundaries of the traditional disciplines deliberately dissolve, mix and blend. All build on the increasingly globalized world, where human beings are becoming more citizens of the world than citizens of the cities with universalized urban functionality.

In this regard, we find that the 'anonymous' chair, the Monobloc, has a unique role in the world heritage creating a tie between different cultures and our work is a step further on Urban Image Construction based on the works with the History, Heritage and Urban Change of Venice.

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