INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL REGENERATION PROJECT: HUERTA DE ALBORAYA. A WORKSHOP OF PRACTICE EXPERIENCE AND ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT

Y. Hernández Navarro[1], F. Vegas[1], M. Vellinga[2], C. Mileto[1]

[1]Universitat Politècnica de València (SPAIN)
[2]Oxford Brookes University (UNITED KINGDOM)

Abstract

For the 2017-18 academic year the School of Architecture of the Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment of Oxford Brookes University (OBU) has chosen the Huerta de Valencia as an international location for its Regeneration and Development Project within its MA in International Architectural Regeneration and Development. The aim of this exercise is to study the regeneration and sustainable development of the Huerta Valenciana as an inherited habitat. To do so, a work group made up of teachers from the Higher Technical School of Architecture (ETSA) of Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), specialists in the field of study, together with teachers from OBU School of Architecture directed and coordinated a series of activities within the "International Architectural Regeneration Project. Huerta de Alboraya" workshop held at Huerta de Alboraya.

Thirty students from more than ten different countries, aided in translation by UPV students, studied the current situation through interviews and discussion panels with local authorities and specialists, authors of conservation and environmental protection plans, agricultural workers, entrepreneurs in food industry activities and in the tourism sector. These environmental, social and economic data collection tasks were combined with visits to agricultural production, artistic production and tourism sites. The planimetric surveys of different types of vernacular architecture characteristic of the area of study were also carried out.

The final results of this learning methodology, based on practical experience and active involvement abroad offer innovative solutions to real problems, while providing cultural and social awareness of the habitat in which they are proposed, as well as environmental responsibility and economic feasibility. These results will also allow the skills developed for work in remote cultural contexts and cultural exchange between students to be assessed.

Keywords: Innovation, technology, research projects.

1 THE WORKSHOP AS A CASE OF SERVICE-LEARNING

The Regeneration and Development Project is one of the courses within the International Master's in Architectural Regeneration and Development taught at the School of Architecture of the Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment of Oxford Brookes University. It aims to provide students with the skills and competences necessary to work in distant unknown inherited built environments, promoting an interdisciplinary approach combining critical thinking, analysis, and creative design.

During the 12-week course, students focused their work on a specific context, this year in Huerta de Alboraya, although only the first week is dedicated to compiling data on site. The remaining 11 weeks of work are divided into two periods: the initial 4-week period was spent examining and developing a regeneration of the area under study in groups of four, while the next 7-week-long period focused on the individual definition of a building/design project as a practical example for the initial regeneration strategy proposed [1].

Initially the workshop methodology had two aims. On the one hand the project had to allow for the integration of conceptual, procedural and attitudinal content, while on the other, the information thus learned had to be of use to society, translating the experience into real service to a local community, with an implicit intention of solidarity, answering to true needs [2].

Presenting the issue under study to individuals from elsewhere and unfamiliar with it paved the way for new interpretations from a different cultural context and was motivating to students, who were encouraged to take action.

2 COLLABORATIVE WORK AND ACTIVE LEARNING IN THE CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE

As in any professional setting, the importance of planning the schedule and outline of the work to be carried out on site is undeniable. Researching and understanding the underlying environmental, sociocultural and socioeconomic issues in these historic settings is vital in the search for viable solutions for the regeneration and sustainable development of depressed areas. A workshop methodology was therefore selected to ensure the most efficient data collection in the shortest time possible. The activities programmed under the title 'International Architectural Regeneration Project. Huerta de Alboraya' required active student participation in order to ensure a successful exercise in accurate and reliable data collection.

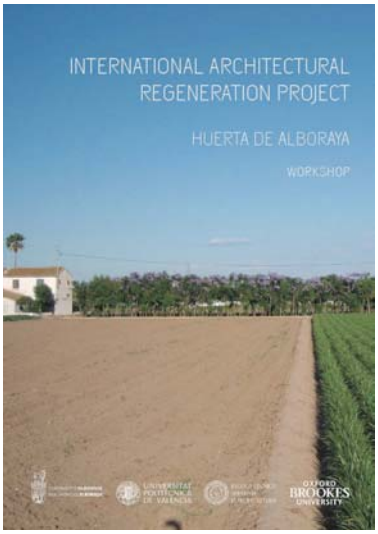

Figure 1. Extract from the Workshop programme.

However, this data collection also benefits from establishing clear distinctions for the fields of analysis and the simultaneous exchange of information between groups. For this, prior to fieldwork students were organised into 7 groups of 4 depending on the theme to be studied: Huerta de Alboraya in its local and regional context, Heritage and vernacular architecture in Huerta de Alboraya, environmental sustainability and wellbeing data, social data, economic data, building survey (plans and sections), building survey (elevations, building materials and details). Students subsequently worked in the mornings on gathering specific information, and then took part in joint discussions in the afternoons. This collaborative work allowed individual students to assimilate more and higher quality information by constantly contrasting, confirming and disproving it.

Depending on interlocutor(s) taking part and where they were held, different knowledge-building activity formats included interviews, roundtables, guided visits and the planimetric survey of buildings combined with constructive experiences on materials and techniques.

2.1 The interview

In order to obtain concise current environmental sustainability and wellbeing data for Huerta de Alboraya, students carried out previously prepared interviews with specialists in the field including the environmental technician of the City Council of Alboraya and the Technical Engineer of Public Works of the Town Council of Alboraya, who provided objective data and figures. Agricultural workers, entrepreneurs for activities in Huerta de Alboraya and local residents were also interviewed to provide quantitative and qualitative data on the environment, landscape, healthy activities or waste management.

Interviews were also used to compile social data, profiling those connected with Huerta de Alboraya at present and in the past, although in this case special emphasis was placed on anonymous interviews with local residents and individuals who were visitors interested in the location.

The physical surroundings used for these meetings were vital to processing the information collected, transforming it into knowledge. In addition to occasionally providing meeting spaces, the Town Council

provided data in the form of minutes, agreements, reports, etc. The rest of the meetings took place in agricultural workers' fields or storehouses; entrepreneurs' offices and factories and local residents' homes.

It should be added that interviews were sometimes combined with planimetric surveys of local vernacular architectural typologies and these were generally used in individual interviews.

2.2 Roundtables

The roundtable format was chosen to compile local and regional information on Huerta de Alboraya, as well as on its heritage, vernacular architecture and economic data. Interlocutors from different fields contributed, offering their views on individual topics. For example, the roundtable on economy examined topics such as the current role of agriculture in local economy, the business models currently in place and their profitability; new economic activities; and the extent to which urban regulations condition these aspects.

In order to collect objective data students at these roundtables discussed the same issue with different interlocutors, obtaining different responses simultaneously prompting debate. Again touching upon the example of the table on economy, all the interlocutors, including the president of the local agricultural cooperative, entrepreneurs promoting new economic activities, and the municipal architect expressed different stances. While the president of the local cooperative defended small farmers, entrepreneurs promoted new business models and the architect explained the extent to which local and regional urban planning limits or promotes construction and its uses in Huerta de Alboraya.

This format was also used to compile and produce information on regional regulations. Through these roundtables representatives from the different workgroups - Huerta de Alboraya in its local and regional context; Heritage and vernacular architecture in Huerta de Alboraya; and environmental sustainability and economic data - compiled information contrasted by the experts supervising the new model for territorial action. In this case the students built on the knowledge acquired from previous roundtables in order to learn more, proposing feasible proposals for the management of such a sensitive setting as the Huerta de Alboraya in future, analysing the pros and cons with the interlocutors.

Students therefore concentrated on the individual aspects examined while comparing and cross-referencing data, reaching conclusions and increasing knowledge.

Figure 2. Roundtable on economy and agriculture.

2.3 The guided visit

Guided visits are another type of activity organised for the creation of knowledge. These immersive experiences in atmospheres full of sensory stimuli help students identify past uses and activities, and are combined with specialist explanations to promote the understanding of customs, traditions and ways of life, both past and present. Visits to vernacular constructions in Huerta de Alboraya, such as

barracas, *alquerías* or *casas de labrador*, both in museum conditions evoking past use, or buildings transformed and modified in contemporary times, allow the students to recompose and consolidate the knowledge created previously. For example the spatial organisation and main façade orientation of buildings or even the absence or presence of certain characteristic elements of given architectural typologies (watchtower, wheel or chapel) are thus of use in clarifying initial impressions.

In addition, visits to more modern buildings make it possible to see, listen to and assimilate the productive processes connected with them. This is the case of a guided visit to tiger nut drying facilities, where students have been able to observe the process of drying and selecting tiger nuts from the moment they are collected in the field to when they enter the market, depending on their final use (*horchata* or tiger nut milk, beer or baking, cosmetics, etc.), as well as analysing the implications of how technology has mechanised certain phases.

Figure 3. Guided visit to Alquería-museo del Magistre.

2.4 Planimetric survey of buildings and practical experience in constructive techniques

One step of the assessment of the traditional architectures of Huerta de Alboraya is through drawing but this assessment is more accurate if students learn about the traditional manual constructive techniques used in these buildings, understanding and experimenting with them first-hand. It is easier to understand the value of the different parts of these constructions after working on techniques such as adobe or rammed earth. For this reason the activities week included an afternoon of practical construction with earth, the material used in the vernacular buildings in Huerta de Alboraya. This activity included the construction of an adobe wall, a rammed earth wall and earth renderings. Thus, students were able to learn about these constructive techniques in buildings and understand the human effort behind the traditional architecture of Huerta de Alboraya, its weak points (degradations and pathologies) and potential.

3 RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the final days of the workshop students became fluent in the use of the technical vocabulary specific to the area under study, even using words in a foreign language. This reflects the successful attainment of one of the aims of this educational strategy, understanding and assimilating local culture, building new knowledge. It can be concluded that this workshop has been an excellent tool for active learning and cooperation. This new knowledge was only made possible by active student participation. As Gardner says, students learn by doing and not by memorising. Preparing and drawing up questions, analysing and cross-referencing data to confirm or refute initial hypotheses and working on practical activities all help to reinforce mental concepts which have gradually taken shape and been transformed and clarified depending on the individual student's needs [3]. In addition, cooperation between peers was essential in creating individual knowledge, sharing personal work to reinforce

concepts learnt, and further expanding this knowledge by establishing a correlation between what was learnt individually and new contributions from peers.

The use of workshops stimulated students who already displayed problem-solving skills in adapting the inherited built environment through new and viable uses, including designing new interventions within a historic context. This showed newer, more innovative and dynamic approaches for problem-solving by taking into account social, cultural and economic factors which will hopefully lead to the regeneration and sustainable development of Huerta de Alboraya.

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