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6.1. Design Studio Dissertation

The graduation process is the institutional recognition that someone has acquired competencies in a specific field or domain. Typically it is accomplished by a dissertation thesis in which the proponent shows his/her skills in the domain. Thinking so, some architecture schools promote design studio projects as dissertation thesis; in fact architectural design is the activity that better characterizes architecture as a profession, but it is also the most complex activity to evaluate. In spite of design studio allowing the acquisition of reflection-in-action competencies, design is also a craft and the design project as final result is heavily dependent on both. This means that on the one hand, the problem raises when we think about the skills that proponents do have to show, what are the skills they have acquired that should be evaluated at the dissertation discussion. On another hand, the skills that an educated architect should have are already defined in part by the professional national accreditation boards, in part by the Bologna Process which refers specifically the need of research integration at the Master graduation courses. So, beyond all the institutional accomplishments, the problem is about what does research in design means, how could it be accomplished in dissertation design studios and how should it be evaluated, problems that José Fernando Gonçalves paper answers with a possible thematization of master design studio courses.

The lecture by A. Clancy, C. Moore and M. McGarry is very relevant in this respect because it fosters the design studio dissertation thesis to the accomplishment of a set of complex skills. Intuition and judgement, the importance of the design process, the craft skills needed to architecture as a practice, the alternation of moments of reflection and moments of action in the design process, self-reflection as a typical research activity. But maybe one of the most interesting points of their lecture is the analogy between design studio research and the work of the alchemist, and this is important not only because the alchemist knows precisely what he wants to achieve but mainly because, as we know now, he never achieved it. The alchemists are the ancestors of scientists, but in fact they never produced science,

as we know it today; the science of the alchemist is blended with his empirical observations and for the alchemist the process is maybe more important than the result. Furthermore, for the alchemist the research process is heuristic – a proposition that is further developed by José Miguel Rodrigues.

Claiming from a philosophical point of view, Rodrigues points to several aspects that should be noticed: the nature-based-action of architectural design or architecture-in-the-making (as Albená Yaneva uses to say), the dependency of architecture on the intelligibility of design projecting, the heuristic process of giving birth to “architectural action”, the difference between practical and theoretical problem. Sustaining his position from the renaissance treatise authors (Serlio, Palladio, Alberti) in which theory and practice converged – meaning that their design projects were at least as important as their theoretical considerations – he concludes that both activities are “two sides of the same coin”. However, as the author points, Palladio was already a mature architect when he wrote his treatise, and the references to his own work as “examples” (or “practical research”) need to be interpreted to this light – thinking so, how could a young student, that has yet not even built a table or chair, work on a design studio dissertation? And thinking that research by design implies not only a theoretical formulation of architecture but as well as a practical one, Rodrigues formulates the theoretical-practical problem as a request for research by design or practice based dissertation thesis. The problem unresolved, however, is to know which precedes the other. Should theoretical formulations precede the design practice (fostering design studio to an applied technology) or is the opposite that should be observed: the design studio practice as formulation for theoretical propositions (fostering design studio to a reflective practice)? The future of research by design is still dependent on the answers that each one of us (teachers, researchers, students) may give to those questions, in spite of the great interest that they will certainly have to other fields of knowledge as social sciences, arts and humanities, technology or even philosophy.