

# CHIT CHAT: CAN ARCHITECTURE REMAIN RELEVANT AND A FEW OTHER INCONSEQUENTIAL QUESTIONS



Women's School of Planning and Architecture



*Growing with architecture, Let's build a hut.*  
i2a istituto internazionale di architettura with Pihla Meskanen  
(Arkki, Helsinki), Vico Morcote, 2011

1. Why did you pick this picture?  
How does it relate to your vision for a future architecture school?

**CHARLOTTE MALTERRE-BARTHES:** This is an image of the Women's School of Planning and Architecture (WSPA), dating from the 1970s. It was a feminist planning educational project, whose members were deeply convinced that design had agency, responsibility, and could create spaces that were fit for those who use it. It was a reaction to planning disciplines as top-down, male-dominated fields producing designs detached from the needs of people. It is related to a possible vision for a future architecture school because WSPA is an initiative that tackles and opposes several issues that the current architecture school still needs to address. Most architecture schools do not reflect society, not in content or in form. For instance, look at curricula: contemporary education in architecture features a limited amount of references, a limited amount of teaching methods, and cites a limited amount of iconic figures in theory and in practice—this is the canon. Now, we know those who have written the canon suppressed the work and practices of others deemed unworthy because of gender, sexual orientation, geographic origins, ethnicity, social background, etc. This is then reflected within practices and in the design of our built environment.

**LUDOVICA MOLO:** This is an image taken in the summer of 2011, during a camp for kids we organized at i2a in Vico Morcote, formerly SCI Arc Vico, with Pihla Meskanen from Helsinki as main tutor (from Arkki). It represents very well what architecture school could be—even if in this case the students are kids of different ages ranging from five to fourteen—a collective learning process, where students and tutors work together at a common project, sharing goals and teaching each other the skills: ancient techniques used by communities around the world to build together their settlements.

It is important to insert architectural teaching into a context that is timeless, into the continuity of the history of architecture from its very origins. Building is a public/political act at the service of the life of communities and human beings, rather than the vision of a brilliant mind or the realization of the idea of individual genius. Architecture is a common good, a collective process, where an entire collectivity can be involved and feel itself represented.

This image suggests that if a group of people, a community, gets together it can provide for itself, and at the same time that there is a building tradition, a craft knowledge, that needs to be passed on to the next generations.

**CMB:** In a way, Ludovica's image points to this possible deconstruction of icons, questioning the teaching by a master of a single-sided knowhow, signed by a single author. In many schools, the single genius male architect is an undisputed figure. Archival work, design-studio references, history classes are not deconstructed. Many students and even professors don't know that Lilly Reich designed most of Mies van der Rohe's furniture, or that Hannie Van Eyck exists as co-author of

Aldo's work, while hidden figures like Minette da Silva, Geoffrey Bawa, or Eileen Gray remain absent from the curriculum. In a similar way, design work is rarely integrative. Learning from children, from people with local knowledge, or from users remains frowned upon, a fringe leftist position.

2. How would you say this relates to the question of free space?

**CMB:** I guess it is about claiming the school should be an inclusive space—that is, free for all—and that generates freedom for people, freedom of movement, freedom from fear, etc. In many countries, architecture schools are for the elite. In Switzerland, women (50.41%), the foreign-origin part of the population (38%), and those living with disabilities (15% of the population) are underrepresented in planning. The profession remains largely an able-bodied-wealthy-white-male-dominated one, both in the faculty and in traditional practice. I believe this needs to change drastically.

**LM:** I totally agree with Charlotte's position. I just would like to add that one could imagine a school that is closer to the needs of society, where the themes approached really respond to relevant issues, with a more responsible (a political?) attitude: a school that is more porous towards the outside and less isolated into itself. At the same time, it would be interesting to imagine a way of teaching that is less hierarchical and more open, less frontal and more collective, less selective and more inclusive.

**CMB:** This is very interesting. I think it's maybe useful to think also about how such a change would percolate into the office. Can the architectural practice recognize multiple authorship, collaborative intellectual property? Because I think there, too, a lot could be done. To acknowledge that design is a collective endeavor is a step toward deconstructing injustice and exploitative processes at work. How would you say this plays out in today's architectural world?

**LM:** I am absolutely convinced that in order to reestablish a balance in numbers between the genders in professional life—we know that in architecture school women outnumber men, whereas very few find themselves later on in a leading position in architecture firms (as we can also observe in organizations like the Federation of Swiss Architects, where women are still a minority)—we should invent a new way of working, a more inclusive one, a more horizontal one, certainly a more collective one where individual authorship is not the standard and egos don't prevail.

3. In what way do you see architectural education changing for the better?

**CMB:** Several initiatives in the past few years have pushed forward progressive agendas. There is a timid increase in female professors across schools. Many design institutions, like Harvard Graduate School of Design, for instance, have pivoted to address racial issues and tackle the lack of women and BIPOC [black, Indigenous, and people of color] in positions of power, as well as integrate climate emergency in their curricula. In Swiss schools, the work of internal and grassroots parity groups (in the ETH and EPFL) have sparked discussions on reinventing the studio format, questioning critiques as rigid assessment methods, and investigating new forms of teaching, but also discussing construction materials from the point of view of colonial extraction or addressing traditional crafts from the standpoint of labor, gender, and race. Those need to become mainstream realities, and schools need to embrace the change to remain relevant.

**LM:** I see schools being more open to broader discourses such as participation, reuse, temporary planning, and social issues, and less focused on exclusive self-referred programs. In many schools we see building workshops—especially in the first years, where students and tutors gather together around a common goal—debating objectives and learning together how to reach them in a collective building process.

To add to what Charlotte already pointed out, for schools to remain relevant there is a need to be more political, to address questions that are truly socially significant.

**CMB:** There is change, it's true. Things are moving forward. The role of pedagogy is so important because schools have role-model positions, and are, or should be, the most progressive sections of the building industry. In that way, large and renowned institutions have a huge responsibility, and must be exemplary. They have to show the way ahead, whether in gender and diversity politics or in addressing the extractive processes the profession relies on, and what these do to the environment, as well as speak up against social injustice and abusive practices. I expect more schools that have thus far remained outside of this discussion to pivot and address these challenges—and I can see how practice will shift, even as a definition of what a practice actually is, as the influence of new generations is felt.