

ARCHITECTURE: One big puzzle

Laura Grier Vidal

5 pages

12/06/2019

Since I was born, in July 1993 in Sabadell, Architecture has always been present in my life. It could be said that I have grown up surrounded by construction plans, the ones of my father's office. As I grew older, computers became far more common than parallelographs, except for a tiny little detail that made a difference to me: the pencil. It was a blue Staedtler mechanical pencil (the typical, he used to say), which was the origin of the first idea, the first scrawl, the first draft.

Very soon, extremely interested in everything that had or worked due to technology, my father started to take me with him to visit new constructions, first unconsciously; later to help him, which has always held me spellbound.

Once the compulsory studies stage was finished, during which the technologic world was my favourite, I did not hesitate about choosing such field also in non-compulsory secondary education. Obviously, technical drawing had a special place, as I looked forward to my father to get home and explain to me all the aspects that were not so clear or the ones I wanted to know deeper. I even arrived fascinated at class with the explanations of an expert and, delighted, shared them with my colleagues. Probably, in that moment it was already possible to see that teaching was also part of my way of being. It was a pleasure to participate that last course as a "junior teacher" by the side of Isabel Crespo at ETSAV.

It seemed a cliché, how everything pointed out to me following the steps of my father. However, at the beginning, I did not want to do Architecture, as for me it meant a great incompatibility between family and professional life. However, I devoted my research project of the second course of high school studying the evolution of arches along history. Such research project was my first insight into Architecture from a scientific point of view. I wanted to investigate when and how the antique openings formed by columns and lintels gave way to arches, and inside those especially how Gaudí used the catenaries to build his so characteristic arches.

Such study could not be just theoretical, logically. Architecture is not an external element to life, so the relationship that buildings have with society and their evolution in history represented for me a daunting challenge: studying the history of architectonic items. And I say "challenge" since History has always been a difficult subject for me. Carrying out such project allowed me to clearly see that architecture is, without any doubt, one more item in the creative world of the human being, a representation of its worries and its desire for improvement.

After non-compulsory secondary education and determined to continue my way far away from architecture, I started a Degree on Mathematics, where I realized that, even though I really liked them during secondary education, they were not meant for me. On the one hand, the mathematical field became an abstract word, worlds apart from my technologic world, in which the questions and the solutions are so tangible and useful for me. On the other hand, I missed so much technical drawing, my favourite subject since ever.

Thus, I gave up that Degree and then I enrolled in a Superior Grade of Edification Projects in the institute Castellarnau of Sabadell, where I realized that such field of study really appealed to me. As a complementary event, during the practical hours I was allowed to work in a different office. Once more, theory and practice were coupled. As the years went by, my father specialized in the restoration of buildings, historical among others. From the office where I did my internship, mainly households were built. Though a bit different, the calculation of structures has always been the basis, and I was very enthusiastic.

In 2014 I enrolled in *Escola d'Arquitectura* in Sant Cugat (ETSAV), a School of Architecture. Since that moment, all the preconceived ideas about what is or what architecture should be according to my beliefs were questioned. I started these Degree as a way to learn more and more about the world of drawing. I could have never imagined that I was going to learn so much of so different fields.

To start with, the teamwork. I have always been a very shy and reserved person, and that, there, had to be saved in a drawer at home. It was necessary that all of us got unconditionally involved in the tasks and projects.

If until then I had had the feeling of having the control over my studies, here the first earthquake arrived: the first fail of the course was in a group activity which aimed at working on isolation and inertia. In the subject "Basis for the Technique" we should be able to keep 21 degrees in a construction along several days. To develop such project, it was necessary to leave the comfort zone that the classrooms represent for students. It was not a visit to constructions, it was a field work that implied constant checks, day and night, every day, weekends included. Results: a total disaster. But from that I learnt an important lesson: if it does not work, it has to be repeated... "*extravagant*", that was how people around us called such projects. They regarded us as crazy, but here it could also be seen that for architecture, research is also important, and in that case it was focused on improving the relationship between well-being and constructive quality.

Never before had I considered that the school of architecture could make me think about aspects and proposals that, until then, for me were not related to the concept of Architecture at all. Another example that left a footprint on me for the rest of my life was the projection of "The Party of Water". Such project forced me to do my best, as, apart from the plans, a conceptual mock-up, a performance, and a text were required. I felt totally overwhelmed by the request. I, a logic and concise person, did not know even where to start. Once more, the teamwork was highly rewarding and demonstrated me the wideness of the concept of Architecture.

The first year I really enjoyed the Drawing subject, with all the descriptive geometry; and later the wide variety of structural subjects appeared, which I also liked a lot. What motivated me or attracted me of technical drawing, I could not tell. Probably, the belief that what lays behind a construction plan is often undervalued. They are draws, yes, but nobody regards them as art. It might not be in the strictest concept, but such plain lines are the genesis of whatever draft of a refuge. For the first time, I faced a real situation: it was necessary to look for the way of using some buildings to give shelter to refugees, keeping a certain economic activity during the day and respecting the needs of people with very different customs to us.

To summarize, it could be that due to the fact that these studies include so many aspects, they never reminded me of studies with master lessons, taking notes, etc. The most academic, theoretical fields have been mixed with a lot of experiences and different ways of learning. I would like to mention some that are especially remarkable for me.

I have already mentioned the "Party of water". It was a great challenge in the second course. No drawings were required, neither any building. It was necessary to find a mobile construction which could allow merging games and water during hot weather seasons. It was very difficult, and we had to make a great effort not to give up. It was in that very same course when we were asked to study nearby things. The things that are close to us or that are part of our daily life do not arouse our interest. But this does not mean that we have an exhaustive knowledge about them. As an example, with the study of the temperature of my house, I discovered its behaviour but also some inefficiencies.

From my third course I would like to highlight an activity that, until then, was totally unknown for me: to be an intern. I applied for an internship offer at the Technology department. Then, another totally unfamiliar world appeared in front of my eyes: the possibility of doing some remunerated tasks at University. It consisted of summarizing all the projects from the previous 10 years. With this task I learnt that materials can have some different applications to the ones we are used to nowadays.

“Not all the pointed arches are Gothic”. Such statement was said by Mr. Giner in Composition I. Continuing with my interest in arches, choosing *la Seu de Lleida* in Composition III, a subject of the third course, let me learn about how to distinguish the Romanesque and the Gothic. Instead of studying each style separately, I looked for a building that had been started with one style but finished with the other. As a result of this work, I learnt that such an occurrence is recurrent, for example in Carcassone. Even though such fact is obvious due to the slowness of the constructions in the period, that does not make it less interesting.

In the subject of “Light Envelopes” of the fourth course, we were asked to make a real size mock-up. We realized then the importance of little pieces, apart from the big volumes that a construction represents. In the past, everything was at wholesale, and no attention was placed on tiny details. Nowadays and every time more, though, highly elaborated solutions are used.

Also, in this course I could work in the field of structures. Besides the curricular subject “Singular Structures”, I chose the optional subject of “Metallic Structures” and also the one of “Gaudí, geometrics and mechanics”, which was the perfect combination of my technical side and his so characteristic arches.

The previous quarter I was offered the opportunity of developing one of the activities I most enjoy: teaching. I chose the optional subject “Teach teaching”, which consists of working as a junior teacher with the students of the first course. It was an incredible experience. In a place like that, the person feels in the intermediate point between the teachers and the students. On the one hand, you are willing to help the boys and girls that have difficulties; but on the other hand you need to keep in mind which your role is and what is expected from you, as the teachers see you as a student and the students regard you as a teacher, though a bit closer to them. Such controversy brings along inner conflicts but allows to see the reality of teaching from the other point of view. I would repeat the experience as many times as I could.

Travelling has also been part of my formation and it has accomplished with its purpose. In my case, it enriched me more than it can be thought. Going to another place allows you to perceive or see all those things that do not appear in books. If the eyes are kept wide open, a lot of information about people’s life can be retrieved, creating life-lasting memories.

Berlin was the first destination. The discovery that in each train station there is a bakery and a florist awoke my curiosity. It is clear that for German people these two items are part of their basic needs; if not, they would not be present in a daily passage place. Such detail made me think that if someone wants to be a competent architect, he/she has to be well informed. One needs to be aware not only about the needs of the inside of the designed building; but also about people’s traditions, the items that may be just details for some cultures but which are essential for others.

From the urban planning field, we visited Amsterdam, known because a series of canals completes the connection web among neighbourhoods. Bicycles are the main way of private transport and this has transformed them in the predominant element of wheeled transport. It is surprising the fact that bicycles are prioritized even over pedestrians. An architectonic fact that caught my attention was the underground

rooms. To be more exact, though, they should be called “semi-undergrounds”, as in the corner of the street there are some windows in level with the pavement that shed light inside them and they can be accessed from the street, in contrast with the hermetic, dark spaces to which we are used to here.

The last trip in which I took part in was to Basilea. For the subject of “Light Envelopes” we had to do mock-ups both from buildings placed in Barcelona and in Basilea. The trip offered us the possibility of seeing them in their original environment. During this trip, I became aware that in the case of Basilea, it was totally true that no frontiers exist. Its airport was in French land and crossing the borderline between Germany and Switzerland backward and forward is an everyday event for the border inhabitants.

If I look back, I see my years as a student in the School of Architecture of Sant Cugat as a big puzzle or as a huge construction. Pieces that, individually, do not seem to have any connection between one another, any meaning of being together, although their function is perfectly defined. The curricular subjects would be the foundation and the structure, the parts of the building that nobody sees neither appreciates, though whose firmness gives stability and strength to the building. The optional subjects are those elements that form the façade, the flats,... all the visible items and the ones that, when we look up from the pavement, make us decide if we like it or not. That part is determined, on one hand, by the period trend; and on the other hand, by the personal taste of each architect.

I strongly believe that ETSAV has helped me to build some solid foundations to start my professional life. Now it is my turn to construct the building that, despite the obstacles that always appear in life, let me enjoy my profession.