

# UNIVERSITY of Universities [UOU]:

# Redefining the basis of International Teaching of Architecture

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When thinking about teaching and knowledge exchange, is it possible to enhance quality by using international online teaching? That is the aim of our pedagogic project born out of a lockdown affecting students and teachers of Architecture at home. From the combination of confinement and teaching, a brand-new initiative has been designed focusing on higher education: UNIVERSITY of Universities. It is an international project developed by teachers of international universities, starting the academic year 2020-2021.

## BACKGROUND

March 2020 obliged us to stop and reflect on our daily routines. It was the beginning of a new way of thinking. If the pandemic provoked instant changes in our lives from its very beginning, with the passage of months it has become clear that many of these changes are not transient. They will remain with us as a “new normality”.

This text is a reflection upon the opportunities for the International Teaching of Architecture that have emerged out of the lockdown brought about by the pandemic in Europe and beyond.

As academics running separate design studios, our objective established well before the pandemic, has always been an internationalisation of architectural education. The internationalisation we speak of goes well beyond simply teaching through the medium of English to students on Erasmus exchange experiencing a new local culture. What we mean by ‘internationalization’ is a

release from local constraint for a moment to allow students to be exposed to experts from different paradigms of architectural education in different cultures. Each expert brings his or her specialist knowledge for all to share, regardless of the framework in which they normally teach. It is a celebration of the fact that architecture is a globally taught discipline and that it is good for us all to learn together. Therefore, it is important to state from the beginning, that the online teaching demanded by a lockdown of our traditional studios is just such a tool to reach that objective.

## INTERNATIONAL DESIGN STUDIO

The last academic year 2019/20 finished with a debate between our colleagues, teachers of architectural design. Many of them missed the face-to-face teaching and saw online teaching that tried to mimic the studio as provoking a physical and intellectual distance with the students. In some cases that might have impacted negatively upon student attainment. But others saw some positive outcomes. Many of us, working in design studios with an already strong international emphasis, have seen not only highly valued results from our students, but also have also discovered, in a natural way, a new pedagogy that does not try to emulate face-to-face teaching.

The fact that an important part of our student cohort was drawn from students on the Erasmus exchange played somewhat in our favour. These

students began returning to their countries for good as soon as news broke from their home country about a pending lockdown. This allowed us to foresee the need for three months’ worth of online teaching before it was compulsory. Beyond the virtual lectures, crits and tutorials, the submissions for the end of the year also needed to be redefined. We drew at least two remarkable points from this experience that made our practice different from colleagues working with a larger proportion of home students:

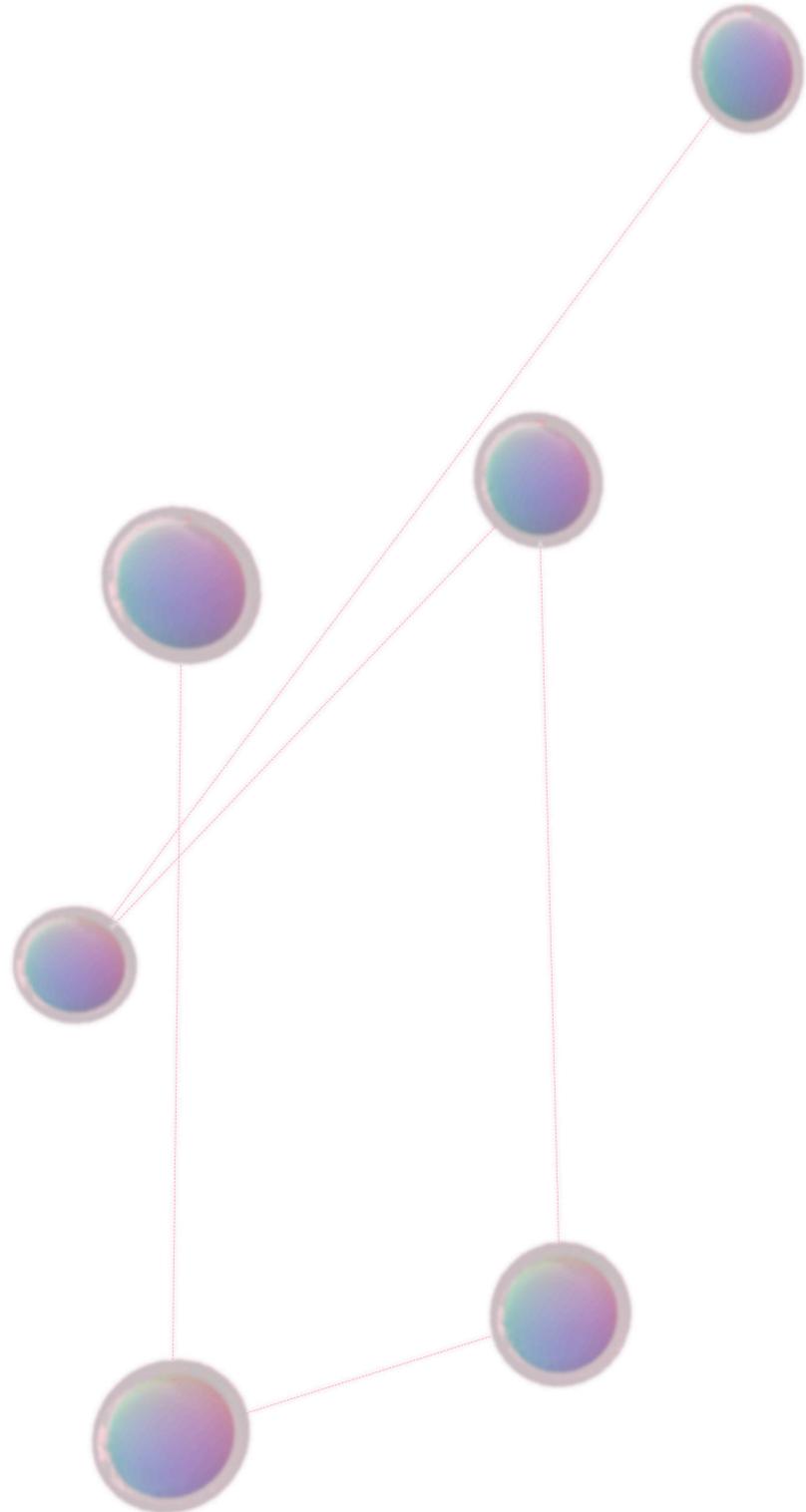
### 1. The importance of continuing the staff exchange between international universities,

despite the difficulties in travelling. Each student on exchange in (the now virtual) studio was asked to invite a significant professor from his or her home school of architecture to participate in the final crit. In every sense, it was a priceless experience to have in the same crit twenty ‘favourite’ teachers from all over the world.

### 2. The importance of expanding the classroom;

during the lockdown students continued to work in groups in different scenarios. This time with a responsibility that produced a new type of emerging architect, as well as a different architecture from that produced by working face-to-face. Now, they are much more autonomous, with projects that materialise reflections over solutions, addressing and proposing new realities.

As we reached the end of a



WORKSHOP #1  
 ARCH: architecture & food – an international buffet  
 AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN DUBAI + EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY IN MADRID

WORKSHOP #2  
 ARCH: architecture as the art of building communities  
 UMEÅ UNIVERSITY + MALMÖ UNIVERSITY

WORKSHOP #3  
 ARCH: cognitive mapping  
 UNIVERSITY OF NICOSIA

WORKSHOP #4  
 ARCH: elements of architecture for the confinement  
 ALICANTE UNIVERSITY

WORKSHOP #5  
 ARCH: architecture through language  
 UWE BRISTOL

WORKSHOP #6  
 ARCH: discover nature in our buildings  
 ION MINCU UAU BUCHAREST

Fig. 1 UOU First Semester 2020/21

hectic academic year and the start of the next, 2020/21, we found that the pandemic did not go away. But for us, that new year started by building on our experience and with a will to expand the international, online lessons we had learnt. So, having detected the two very positive and unique points noted above, our proposal for that new academic semester consisted of organising a studio course built on a network of studio-based academics from different worldwide schools of architecture with a triple aim:

**1. To extend the reach of our universities** by bringing together a coordinated team of international teachers with their specific research interests and practice specialisms.

**2. To extend the notion of the classroom beyond its walls.** By appreciating the 'space for learning' as being more than physical space but instead it being 'a landscape of life', we enrich the students' cultural and learning environment. Ironically, perhaps, we can internationalise more by staying at home. As noted at the top of this paper, for us, 'internationalisation' is not simply experiencing English language teaching in a new local culture.

**3. To extend the international student experience, till now mainly provided by Erasmus+**, to a larger group of students than would otherwise normally have been the case. And subsequently be in a position to bring our new experience to bear on the Erasmus+ programme once the pandemic has subsided.

The 'team' of studio leaders involved numbers about thirty-five at the time of writing but is ever growing. Each studio leader has the trust of the entire team and the freedom to propose and direct a two-week online workshop, based on his or her specialisation, for all the students of the different schools participating in the experience. The other academic staff become tutors in the workshop. After these two weeks, another studio leader takes over with a new workshop, while the former director becomes a tutor of his/her students and so on. That rotating leadership of the workshops maintains the important studio role of 'supervisor' supporting the 'student', but also provides close academic help for the director of each workshop.

For semester one 2020/21 the participating universities were:

Alicante University (Spain); American University Dubai (UAE) + European University Madrid (Spain); Ion Mincu University (Romania); Umeå University + Malmö University (Sweden); University of Nicosia (Cyprus); University of the West of England, Bristol (UK).

These multicultural workshops constituted an international exchange network of studio teachers interested in learning from each other. In this way, the staff participating have not only been suggested by the students, but also, they are teachers willing to accept this basic concern for the exchange of knowledge. And this is, in fact, one of the main values of this pedagogic project: to question the pyramidal system of education, where

the students are at the base and the professor on the top. But not only at the top; at the same time often well isolated from other colleagues. Now, the educational model follows a horizontal relationship; everybody teaches, everybody learns.

At the end of the semester, there was a series of six International Workshops designed to work better online than face-to-face. And, just as with the Surrealists' exquisite corpse game, every workshop was an addition to the former one. The whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, and that is reflected in the students' portfolios.

And, of course, keeping in mind the different academic calendars and engagements of the participants, each university participated in those desired workshops, without it being compulsory to follow all of them. The menu is, then, à la carte and can be fitted bespoke to any student working at the same academic level.

That first semester finished fulfilling all the challenges both for students and teachers:

## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Recognising the different nature of teaching in each university, and the fact that students are engaged in classes other than studio, these workshops are designed not to involve extra hours over and above normal studio time for the students. The studio leader works his/her studio around the

- WORKSHOP #1  
ARCH+ARTS: the space for learning as a landscape of life  
ALICANTE UNIVERSITY
- WORKSHOP #2  
ARTS: maps of memory  
ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS MUNICH
- WORKSHOP #2a  
ARCH: treatment  
BOLOGNA UNIVERSITY
- WORKSHOP #2b  
ARCH: permissive city  
ENSAP BORDEAUX
- WORKSHOP #2c  
ARCH: architectural narrative – event  
LONDON SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY
- WORKSHOP #3a  
ARCH: psychoanalysis of the design process  
UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN
- WORKSHOP #3b  
ARCH: ephemeral architecture: urban follies  
ÉVORA UNIVERSITY
- WORKSHOP #3c  
ARCH: evolution of forgotten  
UNIVERSITY OF NICOSIA
- WORKSHOP #4a  
ARCH: homeland miniatures  
MEF UNIVERSITY ISTANBUL
- WORKSHOP #4b  
ARCH: pop up  
WROCLAW UNIVERSITY + YASAR UNIVERSITY IZMIR
- WORKSHOP #5  
ARCH + ARTS: competition / research: marble  
ALICANTE UNIVERSITY
- WORKSHOP #6  
ARTS: small scale and isolated occurrences  
FINE ARTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PORTO
- WORKSHOP #6a  
ARCH: the 'review of reviews'  
UWE BRISTOL
- WORKSHOP #6b  
ARCH: sharing the voids  
UMEÅ UNIVERSITY + MALMÖ UNIVERSITY
- WORKSHOP #6c  
ARCH: rivers  
BUDAPEST UNIVERSITY
- WORKSHOP #6d  
ARCH: housing Europe  
IUBH HAMBURG
- WORKSHOP #7  
ARTS: moving bodies – on art and walking  
ICELAND UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS
- WORKSHOP #7a  
ARCH: the existent and the non-existent  
ION MINCU UAU BUCHAREST
- WORKSHOP #7b  
ARCH: inside outside  
UNIVERSITÀ DI REGGIO CALABRIA
- WORKSHOP #7c  
ARCH: spatial agency: a detail  
KULEUVEN BRUSSEL
- WORKSHOP #7d  
ARCH: architectural cornerstones  
GERMAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

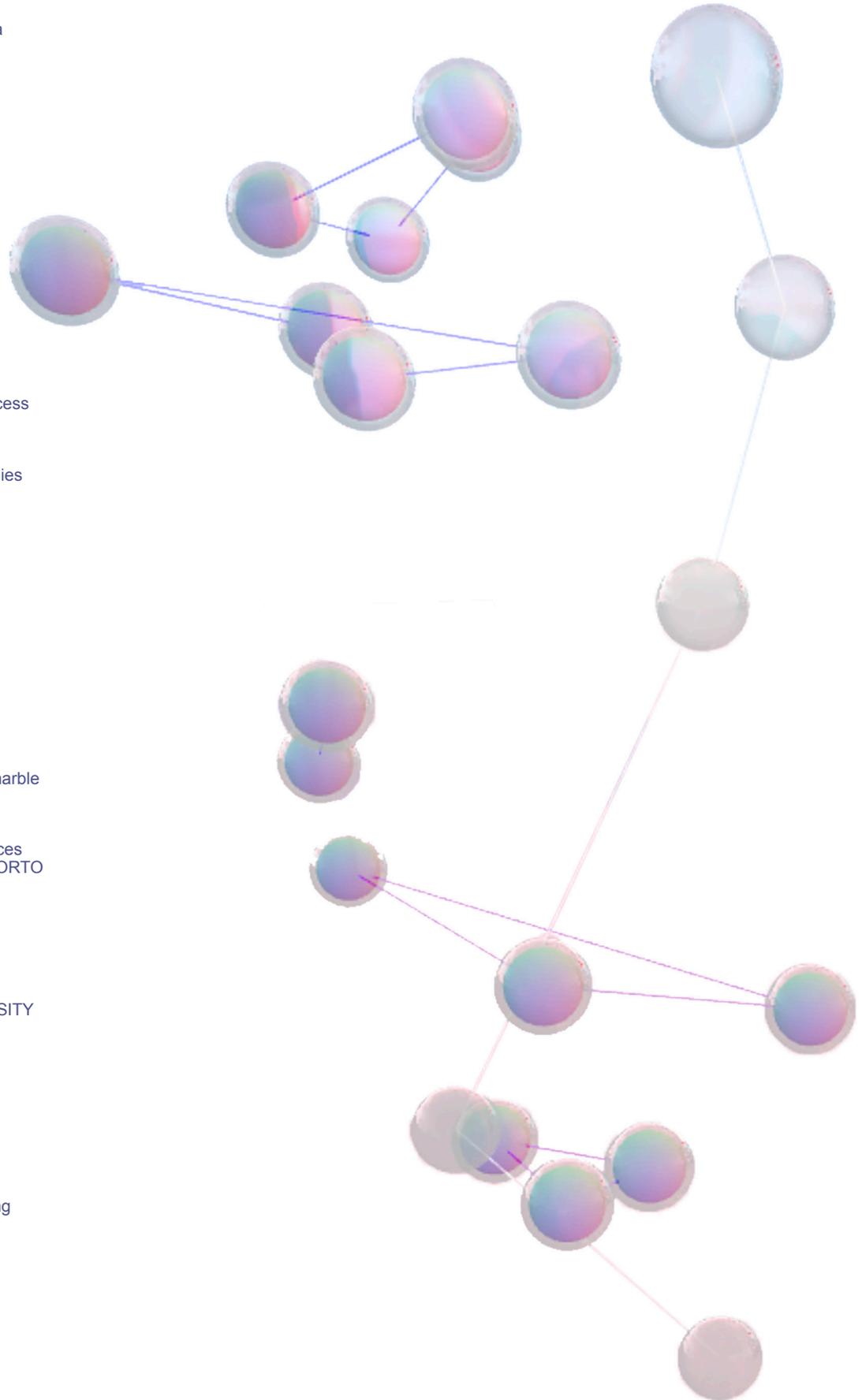


Fig. 2 UOU Second Semester 2020/21

workshops. Whilst, because of staff availability, the normal weekly studio timetable might be adjusted, the cumulative hours of activity required of a student is not altered. The opportunity to work with academics from a wide range of universities, backgrounds and cultures greatly enhances the international feel of the degree programme. As the outputs and confidence grew this experience became more and more enriched.

## THE STAFF EXPERIENCE

Staff exchange has always been an integral part of the Erasmus+ programme, but clearly is limited to those able to travel abroad in normal teaching times. The development of digital architectural workshops opens up the possibility of teaching students in other institutions to many academics who have never had the chance to do so face to face. It also allows them to help colleagues deliver each workshop through their roles as tutors. The exchange of pedagogical ideas was a major outcome of that pilot year.

What started with 6 universities in the first semester, just a few months later multiplied by 4 the number of collaborators. We began the second semester 20/21 with 24 schools of architecture: Alicante University (SPAIN); American University Dubai (UAE); Bologna University (ITALY); Budapest University of Technology and Economics (HUNGARY); ENSAP Bordeaux (FRANCE); European University Madrid (SPAIN);

Evora University (PORTUGAL); German University in Cairo (EGYPT); Ion Mincu University (RUMANIA); IUBH Internationale Hochschule Hamburg (GERMANY); KU Leuven Brussels (BELGIUM); London South Bank University (UK); Malmö University (SWEDEN); MEF University İstanbul (TURKEY); Reggio Calabria (ITALY); Umeå University (SWEDEN); University of Lincoln (UK); University of Nicosia (CYPRUS); Uwe Bristol (UK); Wroclaw University (POLAND); Yasar University Izmir (TURKEY)

This was a fast increase in quantity that also intensifies the quality of the project: firstly, due to the diversity of international universities, a range that goes from Sweden to Portugal, and from Turkey to Iceland. But also, since now there are more workshops than teaching weeks in the semester, the students can afford to choose between a range of offers. That means that they design their own education. According to personal interest, each of the students is able to select up to 10 workshops, just keeping in mind that they don't coincide in time.

This is a new role for the students, who is hence much more active in this educative system, where they define what kind of architects they want to be. In addition, the Schools of Architecture always have valued an intense collaboration with artists. Therefore, we included in this fresh vision to UOU an exchange of ARTS workshops, each of them directed by different teachers

from International Schools of Arts: Academy of Art -Therapy – Munich (GERMANY); Porto University – Faculdade de Belas Artes – (PORTUGAL); Reykjavik University of Arts (ICELAND)

This is what we call the **UNIVERSITY of Universities** and lays the foundations of a proposal for a EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY that completes the ERASMUS programme.

<https://uou.ua.es>

It is our intention that this pedagogic initiative will continue running over the next academic years, even once the pandemic has passed. But to maintain this experience in time, we do need to work up a research project capable of constantly feeding us.

This has been precisely the origin of **UOU scientific journal**. A biannual publication where every issue will underline a specific topic that has been addressed in the series of workshops developed every semester by the professors and students participating in **UNIVERSITY of Universities**.

**UOU scientific journal** will have a different Editor in Chief for each issue, the directors of the different UOU workshops, who will take the research of this journal as a precious opportunity to go beyond with our teaching.