

Introducing the Joint Research Unit

On January 1, 2014 the Joint Research Unit "Architecture, Urbanism, Society: Knowledge, Education, Research" (UMR AUSser no. 3329) had its contract officially extended for 5 years, under the supervision of the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and the Ministry of Culture and Communications.

UMR AUSser brings together four research teams from a partnership of four schools of architecture in Paris: IPRAUS (Paris Research Institute: Architecture, Urbanism, Society) at the Paris-Belleville National School of Architecture; ACS (Architecture, Culture, Society, 19th–21st century) at the Paris-Malaquais National School of Architecture; AHTTEP (Architecture, History, Transport, Territory, Heritage) at the Paris-La-Villette National School of Architecture; and OCS (Suburban Studies Observatory) at the School of Architecture, the City and Territories in Marne-La-Vallée. The joint research unit is thus spread over four sites, with its offices at Paris-Belleville.

The unit is part of Section 39 – 'Spaces, Territories, Societies' – of the National Centre for Scientific Research. It belongs to a partnership involving the Université Paris-Est Community of Universities and Establishments including the 'Cities, Transport and Territories' graduate school [1] itself part of the interdisciplinary hub devoted to the city and of the 'Urban Futures: Development, Architecture, Environment, Transport' laboratory, within which the Unit represents the architectural side and the specific input of the National Schools of Architecture.

[1] The 'Cities, Transport and Territories' Graduate School is backed by the Université Paris-Est Research and Advanced Education Hub, of which the Paris-Belleville, Paris-Malaquais and Marne-la-Vallée Schools of Architecture are associate members.

The unit's field of research

The Unit's research activity revolves around the production of architectural, urban and landscape objects considered in terms of their relationships with the societies that have gradually shaped them and in the light of the new design issues facing researchers, producers and users of these spaces at the level of individual buildings and the territory as a whole.

The Unit exists to play an incentivising role in the definition and evolution of the research field bearing on the architecture, design, production and transformation of settled spaces. Its research aims at building critical knowledge of project philosophies, approaches and processes, together with an objective view of actual practice, while helping to develop the necessary theoretical and operational skills. The Unit intends to reformulate and explore in greater detail a series of questions raised by contemporary development and the global spread of the urban phenomenon, including new ways of living in the city, changes in the modes and scope of transport, redefinition of the heritage and environmental contexts of the urban project, and the circulation of models and practices as globalisation advances.

This is a response to two goals: internally, to contribute to changes within doctoral studies in architecture, and thus to research-based definition of the field; and externally, to generate, in an interdisciplinary context, fruitful dialogue with related spheres of research regarding its aims and its methods.

The studies focus on: the city and inhabited territories, looked at from the point of view of their history, their creation and their futures; the Asian sphere, of special interest in terms of the processes of globalisation and cultural transfer; the materiality of the built environment and the use of materials; the architectural, urban and landscape heritage; teaching and teaching methods for contemporary architectural and urban projects; and the state of play in the production of cities and postmodern architecture.

How are we to design the city of the future and the spatial organisation of territories? How are we to bring

change to the built environment in the light of the need to save space and energy and of lifestyles and social expectations? These issues, considered from the architectural standpoint, underpin the Unit's research project.

Links between research, teaching and professions

The Unit's research field is thus defined by the research rooted in the teaching of architecture, and especially of the architectural and urban project that is the main concern of the National Schools of Architecture. Because they bring together designers, project managers, teachers and researchers, these schools are a crucible for a sharing of ideas regarding architectural, urban and landscape production. In this educational framework questions are raised about the shaping and reception of a proposal, either when a site is being analysed prior to conceptualisation in programme form or during the development process.

The dialogue between teaching and research is a regular part of the different years of the study programme, especially in the post-Masters years – those of the doctorate and the specialist degrees in 'Architecture and Heritage' and 'Architecture and Urban Project' at ENSA Paris-Belleville and 'Architect-Urbanist' at Marne-la-Vallée. The Unit's thematic lines, which match the specific skills of its researchers, are the basis for doctoral training in and through research, the initiation into research at Masters level, and cognisance of current issues at degree level. The relationship between research and the doctorate is fundamental: theses draw on one or more research themes and help stimulate new work at the Unit.

The Unit's research identity also hinges on interaction with professional circles and action research situations, via the activities involving expertise, evaluation and forward planning for which the researchers are regularly called on; thus research has to confront the blockages facing the actors in the field.

This clear determination to maintain fruitful links between research, teaching and the relevant professions and to work simultaneously on fundamental and oriented research, reflects the architecture schools' range of disciplines, as well as that of architecture itself, in its practical and theoretical aspects.

Interdisciplinary dialogue

This rootedness in the architectural disciplines goes hand in hand with interdisciplinary dialogue. Crucial to architectural research, this approach is currently being redeveloped in terms of its issues, tools and methods, all of which are being put to the test by a new urban situation: transformation of spatial systems notably relating to changes in the scale of urban production, shifts in living patterns, the rise of environmental issues, the increased complexity of project processes, and the coming of new research corpuses and tools.

With this in mind, the Unit brings together architects and town planners, architecture historians and engineers, historians of art and technology, sociologists, geographers and philosophers, a number of whom have training in two fields. In addition it accepts doctoral students initially trained outside the architecture field. The point is to utilise the complementarity of these approaches, their perspectives and their methodological stances in the interests of a shared goal.

The development of new methodological approaches takes place within the research programmes and ties in with doctoral teaching in architecture in the multidisciplinary context of the 'Cities, Transport and Territories' doctoral school and the Université Paris-Est Community of Universities and Establishments (COMUE) – notably its 'Urban Futures' excellence laboratory, whose primary goal is the development of innovative interdisciplinary approaches.

International outreach

Cooperative ventures have been set up and developed with foreign partners for multiannual research projects and long-term programmes. European partnerships include Germany, the UK and Norway in the North, and Spain and Portugal in the South; others include the United States, Asia and such emergent entities as Latin

America and Russia.

Research within the Unit has a markedly extra-European component, essentially involving the Asiatic countries. Longstanding collaborations exist with China and, in South-East Asia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. They are given formal shape in the 'Metropolises of Asia and the Pacific: Comparative Architecture and Urbanism' research network overseen by IPRAUS. They are also part of international networks based on geographical and cultural areas of interest: the CNRS & MSH Asie-Imasie network and the European Association for South-East Asian Studies (EUROSEAS).

This Asian component provides the Unit with expertise regarding globalisation and cultural transfers, and this enables it to contribute to comparative studies of architectural and urban changes in the world's emerging regions and territories. Its achievements in the field are attested to by its central role in the networks relating to metropolises in Asia-Pacific and the many specialists it has trained who are now working in the countries concerned.

The Joint Research Unit (UMR): organisation

The Unit's activity is divided up into lines of thematic research and collective transversal projects that involve a number of working groups. These structures are seen as points for specialist link-up and dialogue: dialogue within the Unit itself; with outside researchers and teams working in architectural and other disciplines in France and abroad; and with actors from the professional and institutional worlds.

Six research themes

The Architecture of Territories: Transport, urban forms, environment. History and prospects

Research into the relationship between architecture and the city, in the tradition of the typo-morphological studies that first appeared in the 1970s, has given rise to a field of teaching and research regarding the city and urbanised territories. The studies have evolved in line with changes in inhabited territories, ways of living and ecological issues. Their place in the regional and national context draws notably on the Unit's involvement in the City hub and the Urban Futures laboratory.

Architecture and Cities in Contemporary Asia: Heritage and projects

Asia's architecture and cities are the focus of long-established research programmes which give the Unit a special place in the world of Asian Studies. The team is one of the few in France to conduct research into the city from the point of view of Asian architecture, and the only one to focus on South-East Asia. The variety and strength of its partnerships, formalised as thematic networks, are major assets in terms of national and international integration, academic and institutional influence, and professional outlets for young PhD's.

Architecture and the Technical Approach

The reorganisation of the Joint Research Unit for its new five-year contract allows for a major thematic venture into the field of construction and utilisation of materials, which examines issues at the heart of the architect's métier. The studies are characterised by a frank combining of a technically oriented and a cultural approach markedly different from the strictly internalist variety practised by some historians of techniques and construction.

Heritage and Project

Consideration of questions relating to heritage and contemporary interventions in the heritage context is well established and multifaceted. The research is markedly urban in nature, focusing on the historical European

city, the Asian city and territories urbanised in the second half of the 20th century; and their interest in terms of non-monumental heritage and the materiality of the built environment as seen from the point of view of the project.

Present-day Architecture: Mediations and concrete outcomes

Devoted to architecture from 1970 up to the present, this segment directs our attention back to concepts often considered marginal: 'postmodernism'; the gradual interpenetration of the worlds of private and public project management; the intellectual status of the culture of architecture; the training of elites in a world that saw its way of functioning and its global vision shattered by the first oil crisis; and the scholarly and the popular.

Architecture: Dissemination, transmission, teaching

Addressed via its teaching and the media and modalities of its transmission, the study of architectural and urban design fits with a viewpoint involving historical studies and contemporary expertise. This approach is important at a time when schools of architecture are at a turning point in their history: the teachers involved in founding pedagogical units after the breakup of the École des Beaux-Arts are now passing the baton to a new generation. This kind of research is part of the very dynamic field of studies of the pedagogy and teaching of métiers, and is the principal collective contribution on the part of the world of architecture.

Transversal action

The temporalist vocabulary of architectural and urban design

The changes in temporal relationships involved in construction and conservation projects can be grasped by studying the way different time frames become evident. Language, through its vocabulary, syntax and grammar, stabilises, divides up situations, and expresses the flows, rhythms, shifts and tweakings taken up by a given era, social group or culture.

Figurative explorations. New interpretations of the project

The creation of this transversal research theme is a response to the need to investigate rapid change in representations and the proliferation of experimental approaches in the practices involved in the contemporary project. Mindful of the shifting, unstable character of the new forms of representation, our research system – itself exploratory – explores the relationship between the production of images and the processes of design and communication.

Creating a landscape research hub

Our immediate intention is to expand research into landscape and to broaden the Unit's range of skills via a number of topics that feed into and dialogue with those those involved in its other lines of research. Thus the 'large scale' of the project will be examined in the light of the current forms of approach – landscape and territorial projects – in terms of their relationships with architecture and urbanism. In addition, working from a broader investigation of the role of the visual in the shaping of spatial knowledge and practices, we shall analyse the techniques and material forms that enable visual representation and circulation of landscape projects. The *Extended Time Frame of the Landscape Project*, a research seminar directed by Frédéric Pousin and Denis Delbaere, will examine the inertia and resilience of territorial planning in relation to landscape.

In connection with these new topics, the Unit will be undertaking a National Research Agency (ANR) research programme, *Photolandscape: Knowledge, Practices, Projects*, in partnership with LAREP, the

Research Laboratory at the National School of Landscape (ENSP), and the Institute of Modern Texts and Manuscripts (ITEM). The programme is founded on the hypothesis that photography is not merely a recording process; rather, as the instigator of a new way of seeing, using and developing a territory, it is bound up with territorial transformation. Working from the dual point of view of the landscape project and the genesis of photographic practices, the programme explores the forms of knowledge shaped by photography, whether the photographs are taken by artists, landscapers or geographers engaging with interpretation of landscape.

The AUSser Joint Research Unit: some statistics

The AUSser Unit has 71 full-time members – researchers, teachers and administrative personnel – of whom 11 are already qualified research directors; and some 50 doctoral students with multidisciplinary training in France and abroad.
