

## **RETHINKING “LITTLE NARRATIVES” IN DESIGN EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

Grand narratives are the big historical-philosophical project of modern period related to progress. This project is about forming the unity through constructing cities and their spaces by detaching from characteristics making a place. Also spaces are described with the quantitative terms and converted to an instrument according to the requirements and changing conditions of capitalism. Thus today the requirement of “little narratives”, which are the traditional or local knowledge types, is getting more and more increased. The lack of main topics about transforming a space into a place and the human is causing multi level discontinuities can be seen in spatial design education. So it is very important to attract the student’s attention to these topics and enable them to be aware of these topics through “little narratives”. With this aim the application named “Moments Lived in Minimal Spaces” was held as a part of the program in Introduction to Spatial Design Studio. Making individual narratives, determining the relationships, characters, understanding the environment by an integrated view and then designing their space were asked from the students. Under the light of the constructivist approaches, this creative process is aiming to increase the awareness of the student and to lead them for the organization of the space with the conceptual and vital relationships. In this paper we are aiming to define the ways of searching the inputs that can create the differences for design process in a globalizing world and the new ways of motivation for the students. The scope of this study is explaining our design education approach in detail by defining the

application and the results with all its aspects, addressing and sharing them for future expansions.

**Keywords:** Interior Architecture, Integrated Design, Constructivist Approach, Spatial Relationships, Little Narratives...

### **The Little Narratives**

Modernization is a product of the expansion and growth of scientific and engineering knowledge that make it possible to reshape and control the environment in a unique way (Huntington, 2004). Toulmin (2002) states that true thought, and action rationally starts with cleaning the page, and constructing a formal system in all equal cases. This approach, in a sense, corresponds to reducing the statement of Locke (2000) “a blank slate= tabula rasa” as a human mind, to a design process based on inputs constituting the positivist configuration, scientific thought, and technological progress.

Certain rules, standards and “universal laws” which are determined by positivist knowledge developed by Vienna Circle to build a rationalist society in 1920s, in other words “grand narratives” are “the big historical-philosophical project” of modern period related to progress and perfection. It is known that history, and progress; truth, and freedom; reason, and revolution; science, and industry are the main terms of this project.

This Circle, mainly constituted by physicists, and mathematicians, categorizes the knowledge into scientific, and unscientific, and asserts that unscientific knowledge is worthless. The factual world is always the main interest of this Circle. Therefore the world of knowledge is reduced to the world of the physical being and the expressions outside of perception that haven't any factual response are characterized as metaphysics. That is why the things that have been seen as metaphysics (everything else constituting local knowledge type: cultural values, customs, traditions, beliefs, mythologies, and so on) are accepted meaningless.

Thus the mind, which underlies the modern thought, requires universality, unity, totality, and the idea of “the same rules for everywhere”. It is assumed that reasoning remains basically same in

different countries, cultures and historical periods (Harland 1987, Rosenau, 1998). As a result Colquhoun (1990) mentions that positivism pushes the spatial design to eclecticism as well as functionalism through detaching meaning from pure means.

This idea is about creating unity and global facts, in other words: the form of the total unity by constructing cities and their spaces which are detached from social life and historical, cultural, local values that are the characteristics of making “the place”. The space is reduced to an infrastructure and described with the quantitative terms like size, speed, productivity, and amount. Also the space that can be redefined, reorganized, destroyed in order to create the new, is converted to an instrument according to the requirements and changing conditions of capitalism.

According to Lyotard (1984) if these grand narratives are abandoned, a free play can be possible for the “little narratives”. These little narratives as the materials, which are the creations of imagination, are traditional or local knowledge types, so they are contextual, conditional, and limited. Actually little narratives are all the narratives of truth abstracted from scientific claims, and related to societies from which they are derived instead of being depended on objective confirmation (Kumar, 1999) These little narratives are also the features transforming a space into a place. At the end of 19th century when the first waves of modernist planning excitement occur, Daniel Burnham insists on not being satisfied with the little plans. Against to Burnham’s statement, Aldo Rossi asks what he could long for in his career according to the conditions of today. His answer is “certainly the little things” as he has seen that history excludes the possibility of the grand things. (Harvey, 1997)

### **Design Education**

Today the lack of main topics about the place, and the human can be seen in spatial design education is causing multi level discontinuities. So it is very important to attract the student’s attention to these topics and make them to be aware of these through “little narratives” by using integrated design approach from the beginning of their education. The little narratives statement includes the data constituted by the differences that turn a space into a place and the features of human being as an existence (=dasein).

In this study “the little narrative statement” with this data is expanded by a priori knowledge about life carried by the design students that is shaping their personal narratives. In the spatial design education it should be preferred to allow students playing active roles in the design process, instead of transmitting grand narratives or generally accepted principles to them as inactive receivers. In this frame it is asked from student to catch vital differences in physical environment through little narratives, make them visible by spatial design and at the end create different spatial experiences. The main goal is to start from a little opening of the problem to the deep vertical layers of it by an integrated approach in order to create personal design solutions.

In general, the words “integrate” (to bring together or incorporate parts into a whole) and “integrated” (combining or coordinating separate elements to provide a harmonious whole.) come from Latin *integrare*, meaning “to make whole, to renew, and to refresh.” Benzel uses the phrase “Integrated design” as a concept that coordinates the discrete entities of room, building, landscape and city. Integrated design is fundamentally a philosophy that reexamines common ground and boundaries and brings together diverse scales and disciplines into a single organizing network. (Benzel, 1996). Benzel’s approach on the integrated design gives us an expansion on physical dimension. But the integrated design concept focused on this study is not only a way to see the relationships between the different scales and to perceive our environment as a whole system but also understanding the unity of spiritual and physical dimensions forming the vital differences. Deleuze mentions that the power of thinking life as a whole corresponds to the concept of “the difference”. Life is difference and life is the power of thinking different, being different and creating the difference (Colebrook, 1998a). This integrated design approach is found very valuable in order to find different data and expansions for the design process.

According to Deleuze thinking is the event of art and life as a whole and there are three main thinking styles as the powers to transform life which are art, science and philosophy. Art is related to senses and the data of the senses, science is related to functions and philosophy is related to creating concepts. Philosophy creates the concepts by being an impulsive instrument on thinking different by

creating problems. The concepts are not the labels or names, they are producing the way or the direction of thinking and they are more creative than being representative. So a concept gives us the opportunity to think beyond the known or assumed. A concept can force us to interrogate our way of thinking, by neutralizing it to find the new experience and present the new ways of seeing. Therefore we have the power to go beyond our knowledge and experience on thinking how to expand the experience (Colebrook, 1998b).

So the concepts can be seen as the instruments for creating new problems, questioning these problems and forming new environments of meaning. Consequently orienting the students to think with the concepts depended on the design problem and encouraging them to create the differences by the spatial narratives are very important for the design process. Since the concepts can not be managed alone, they should be understood with the new connections and the relationships with each other.

### **“Moments lived in Minimal Spaces”**

The application held in this frame was a part of the program in Introduction to Spatial Design Studio, a second semester course in the First year of Interior Architecture education. Main problem named “*Moments lived in Minimal Spaces*” (Figure 1) was started by searching answers for the given questions and understanding many basic relationships related to the generation of the space.

Some of the questions which were given under the explanation of “The space lived = Space+ Place+ Human” are written below:

- How a void defined as a cube by the dimensions 5m x 5m x 5m can be made meaningful?
- What will be the main quality of this void in order to differentiate it from others?
- What kind of an environment it will be in and what kind of relationships it will construct?
- For whom it will be made?
- What kind of a dwelling story it will have and what kind of a physical reality it will have?

- How the spatial boundaries will be constructed defining the space?
- How is the relationship of the interior and exterior and how this relationship will be defined creatively according to the main concept?



*Figure 1. Presentation of the Main Problem.*

Making their individual narratives, determining the relationships, characters, understanding the environment by an integrated view and then designing their space in a creative way were asked from the students. The concepts and the relationships that have been known or not, aware or not were aimed to be given indirectly to the students. They had the chance to recognize and perceive the basic concepts like human, space, nature, environment, interior-exterior, place, scale, proportion and structure by understanding their fundamental relationships on their own design problems and solutions.

Under the light of the constructivist approaches, this creative process is aiming to increase the awareness of the students and to lead them to organize the space with the conceptual and vital relationships. In order to realize this project, the students have been requested to decide “a name” indicating their design and write a short essay on their spatial and spiritual approach by defining the “key relationships”. Then they have prepared a presentation of the concept including 2d and 3d works in a format which was

determined by the lecturers. But students also had a chance to use a free area on the presentation that they could experience their own artistic and creative ways expressing the soul of their design, the spatial relationships with their environments and their users. So they could be able to find new ways for telling their stories in a stable format that had given before.

There has been ten projects named as *Moments Lived on the Pier* (Figure 2), *A Stop in the Nature* (Figure 3), *Living near by the Sea* (Figure 4), *A Seasonal Shelter for Workers* (Figure 5), *In a Minimal Neighborhood* (Figure 6), *Resting Between Working Sessions* (Figure 7), *Meeting on the Water*, *The Mystery of the Tree*, *Research Unit*, *Mars Space Station Unit* and they were the main narratives that were transformed to spatial realities. Some of the projects will be explained below by their short narratives and the key relationships that the students used them for creating the spatial answers for their personal stories:



Figure 2. Moments Lived on the Pier, Narrative 1.

#### Narrative 1

To be in a place between land and sea and desiring to be in the nature away from the hectic life of the city

Key Relationships: fish, sea, seaside, shelter, sailing, away from hectic life, finding the self...



Figure 3. A Stop in the Nature, Narrative 2

### Narrative 2

A stop or junction point for the mountain climbers or campers that they can be together in a safe, service place by the fire in the nature.

Key Relationships: fire, nature, camping, tracking, climbing...



Figure 4. Living Near by the Sea, Narrative 3

### Narrative 3

A Living space offering a lot for the senses. A silent space that you can detach yourself from the noisy and exhausting life of the city.

Key Relationships: sunset, fish, sea, wine and love...



Figure 5. A Seasonal Shelter for Workers, Narrative 4.

#### Narrative 4

Creating an opportunity as a shelter for the workers who are leaving their homes temporary with their children and mattresses for seasonal work. Reducing the exhaustion of the day and overcoming the difficulties of environmental conditions.

Key Relationships: working, nomadic life, agricultural workers, shelter, temporary living space...



Figure 6. In A Minimal Neighborhood, Narrative 5

#### Narrative 5

An environment offering different and close neighborhood for the people who are searching for a place which is minimal, peaceful, simple, and natural.

Key Relationships: minimalism, natural environment, peace, simple life styles, neighborhood, sharing ...



Figure 7. Resting Between Working Sessions, Narrative 6

#### Narrative 6

A space-place for resting between the working hours as a daily shelter protecting from the sun for the field workers.

Key Relationships: all daylong, enjoy, field, working, under the tree...

At the end of the project process, all the presentations were prepared as a total concept exhibition (Figure 8). Therefore all the Works as a reflection of the studio environment was shared by the other students, lecturers and the observers from other disciplines as an integrated presentation concept and opened to be evaluated.



Figure 8. Final Exhibition

By this, not only the end work but also the process and the basic concepts related to the spatial design could have been observed by all people who were interested in. The process and also the exhibition phase were continued with the same targets like researching, analyzing, sharing, participating and cooperating and collaborating. By the exhibition each student could have a chance to understand what he has done in the total process. Actually designing an exhibition overlapping the main idea of the design problem has been found very effective for evaluating or observing the results of the studio as a whole by making the process transparent.

As a conclusion, today in the interaction with the modernism and capitalism, it is seen that the cities and the spaces inside of them have a rapid change process, the plans depended on creating the grand narratives in different scales has been put into practice and then the qualities of making a place are being lost. The presence of non-place spaces based on scientific thought and technological developments are gradually increasing and spreading fast in global scale. This situation ended with losing the idea of the place and causing individual identity and belonging problems like alienation. In this rapid change process it is important to explore the potentials that turn a space into a place by critical approaches and to evaluate these potentials in order to find out the design solutions for the new.

Hence at the first years of the design education, thematic projects are seen as the means in creating key problems with their key solutions for finding, exploring, and practicing unique and creative ways. The main problem for the lecturer is how a design problem with the complicated, complex relationships will be given to the students, simplified to a basic question, and which instruments can be evaluated in order to create a concrete reality. In this process for the lecturers it is very important to improve their awareness, diversify the ways of seeing, progress in the search for finding creative ways for their students and also reexamine all of these steps continuously. Only by means of these approaches a creative environment can be constructed and shared by the students and lecturer.

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