

SOME QUESTIONS AROUND THE FLOATING UNIVERSITY

Joanne Pouzenc

BETA ARCHITECTURE

How can architecture learn and evolve through this learning process?

How can architecture be resilient?

The architectural projects of today are often spatial translations of a given program (sqm, functions, relations) written by third parties – neither the user, nor the designer – from an assumption of the users' needs based on existing models. Consequently, every produced space responds to an intended and pragmatic function, restraining the possibilities of use before design.

Rather than as an answer to a program, the Floating University can be considered a beta-version of an architectural software; an experiment on an experiment; a *deep learning* architectural bot, evolving from its own learning. Its architecture observes simple rules rather than predefined needs:

1. the environment is part of the architecture, not merely its surrounding space. At any time and under any condition it can be felt, heard, seen, touched and tasted.
2. the spaces allow as many actions and interactions as possible, the predictable ones, as well as the unplannable ones.
3. all actions from an individual or a group are visible while they happen from as many places as possible within the site
4. both the building and the program are invitations to propose, add and transform.

By using standardized scaffolding structures, the Floating University becomes an ideal 1:1 model for experimenting – according to the loop implement/test/feedback – on these predicted rules and on the ideal architecture they produce, always evolving. Delivering transparency and porosity, easily implemented transformations, add-ons, plug-ins or progressive adaptations where all actors – if they feel empowered – are potentially the architects of the developing structure, the choice of the material and system fosters the imagination: simultaneously to seeing what is, the actors and participants imagine what could be. Are those projected images a core value for future forms of architecture? Shall architecture comprehend its genuine capacity to transform? Is the desire of architecture more important than architecture itself?

ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A COMPREHENSIVE DEFINITION

Is indefinability an asset in architecture?

Is indefinability an asset in an institution?

Due to the many aspects it tackles and the broad public it addresses, it is near to impossible to define what the Floating University really is. Is it an “offshore” laboratory of... a machine for... a prototype for... a learning moment... a spatial process... ?

As the Floating University tackles a broad range of scales and matters one of the difficulties encountered while attempting to define it is choosing the focus around which that definition is built. The Floating University looks and acts from the micro to the macro, and on all levels in between. From the bacterial ecosystem present on site to the bigger question of the general use of left over infrastructures in contemporary metropolises, the Floating University embraces a broad range of social sciences, earth sciences and applied sciences, all of them intertwined within the visible structure and throughout the invisible exchanges among the diversity of actors and participants. Is the Floating University an invitation to refuse simplification, to embrace complexities and perhaps even contradictions?

While it is not an UFO, isn't the Floating University an architectural “*Schmilblick*”? The *Schmilblick* has absolutely no purpose and “can be used in almost any occasion, therefore being strictly indispensable”: an unidentified object about which everyone, by only seeing a fragment, is tempted to project all possible ideas.¹

Confronting the impossibility of giving a comprehensive definition for its entirety, we are invited to fragment our definition into parts: in line with the architecture, between the fragments lies the freedom to invent one's own meaning and transfer it onto the Floating University definition. Should we accept multiple meanings as a possible definition? Can we consider complexity richness?

DO WE NEED NEW SITUATIONS FOR (UN)LEARNING

What can we learn from contemporary experimental learning practices?

Do we need to rethink education in the age of information?

By proposing an academic program outside of academia, made up of fragments of diverse academic programs, the Floating University questions the way we learn and exchange knowledge within universities, and specifically the notion of trans- and interdisciplinarity. At the same time, the Floating University tackles the question of the inclusiveness of these institutions. Even if regular universities claim openness, the doors to those open fields are almost impossible to find for the non-initiated: scientific programs are announced within the walls of the universities or through their specialized channels. Furthermore, in the absence of transdisciplinary and translating agents, universities often fail to communicate between the different fields they explore within their walls.

Nowadays learning institutions benefit from the opportunity to conquer two spaces: the physical space and the digital one. New digital spaces can reveal what was previously hidden behind classroom doors. Nevertheless, presence on-line does not necessarily guarantee interconnectivity and exchange. On the contrary, even though it is hidden from the street through its geographical location, the Floating University reverses that tendency by offering a transparent physical space echoed in a transparent digital one, where it is possible to experience content and activities through physical presence. The Floating University tends to value the importance of *Dasein*, encouraging time spent on-site. In between times and spaces of action, “non-activity” is as valued as “activity” as exchanges happen in those in-between periods.

The program gathered participants from about twenty universities as well as groups, collectives, artists, thinkers and members of the public. Within the life span of the Floating University they created different rhythms with different intensities of activities, and amplified the phenomenon’s already present on-site. Trans- and interdisciplinarity are encompassed there within curated and designed rhythms – in space and time – rather than curated and designed moments. Shall architecture focus more on creating dynamics, rather than static spaces?

UN-DEFINE AND NON-INSTITUTIONALIZE

Can a non-institution be permanently non-institutionalized?

How can a non-institution sustain itself?

The concept of institutionalization is related to the creation – the establishment – of an entity, to the definition of the rules that govern it and to its ambition of permanence. Given that definition the Floating University is almost an institution: it has been created and it exists. Rules and a governance have been defined, applied, adapted and transformed based on experiences and practices. Moreover, the Floating University is ideally intended to last for as long as it makes sense. But who would be the benefactors if the university’s continuation – if not its permanency – was ensured? How much time is needed for a non-institution to become an institution, and is this even a realistic goal?

Within projects such as the Floating University, the precarity which results from, on the one hand, the financial frame of public cultural support – which luckily exists – and, on the other hand, by the temporality of the project, seems to unleash the full creative potential of the place through the people making it happen – including users – as if they were creating the spatial realization of *carpe diem*. But such uncertainty is acceptable only for a limited time. Would the Floating University be the Floating University if it was intended to last 10/20/50 years? How can an institution continue to reinvent itself? Does creativity within a non-institution come from the constant need to look at alternative sources of finance? Does progress and innovation come from constantly writing new concepts for grant applications? How big should a community be in order to sustain a project such as the Floating University?

Or in a nutshell: how can public non-institutions gain permanent public support without altering their experimental nature?

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schmilblick> for french readers, the integral version of that brilliant imaginary invention: <http://pierredac.free.fr/schmil.html>



SPACE FOR OPPORTUNITIES

How can we design spaces for all possible uses rather than for defined functions?

How can space empower its users to act?

What is *capable architecture*?

Rather than creating spaces for specific functions, the Floating University displays several clusters of “rooms” assembled through three-dimensional pathways (straight forward, up, down, across, around, above, between...). Within the Floating University and specifically within the main body, every room was designed independently in order to correspond to its better self. The resulting form is the consequence of a skillful copy-and-paste of these elements, assembled by following a series of simple geometric operations regulated by the environment. Following the necessary assemblage of a continuous looping path this becomes the core of the dynamic encounters and links all rooms with one another.

Besides the spaces strictly attributed to daily use (kitchen, storage and toilets) and therefore responding to technical needs in terms of network connection, the different spaces of activity – or non-activity – foster different possibilities of body positions rather than the possible activities themselves. There, one has to reinvent the relationship to action and the way one positions oneself regarding the source or support of knowledge, whether it is people or media. Therefore, ahead of any given activity, the different groups would have to negotiate the choice of the most adequate space, to discuss the necessary adaptation of that space and to implement said change. Action happens before use, voluntarily coercing engagement and appropriation towards the space as well as the conscious understanding of the possibilities of a space.

These actions, sometimes spectacular, are enabled through the choice of materials requiring little basic knowledge and skill for their implementation and easing the transformation process. Beyond unfinished architecture, the architecture of the Floating University is a *capable architecture*: an architecture which materializes its possible iterations and adaptations and invites all kinds of occupations and uses. How can we produce more capable architecture?