Learning by doing

For years, Susanne Hofmann has been combining architectural teaching and practice in a unique way. Her project, Baupiloten, became famous throughout Germany for its conversions and installations. She began with design-and-build participatory projects with students of the TU Berlin, and has since become an in-demand expert for educational buildings for Susanne Hofmann Architects. Making future users an important part of the design approach.

Carl Zillich: What was the starting point of the idea for the Baupiloten?

SH: Was it as a result of shortcomings in school construction or in architectural education?

Susanne Hofmann: People were lamenting how little architecture education was prepared for professional practice. They were either unsuited to it, or they were not trained for the offices in which they would later pursue careers. That’s where the idea of making students the main actors in real projects came from – building pilots (Baupiloten) who are involved in learning by doing. The students did everything, from defining the task with the user to developing their own ideas, which became individual designs in collaboration with the users. The conceptual-academic process ran parallel to the practical process of communicating with the user and working on the real design that would be built.

CZ: What was the role of the user in this process?

SH: It all started when the Erika Mann Primary School in Berlin was to be given a facelift in collaboration with pupils from the third grade and upwards. A path through the garden of the future became an area of focus, from which much ambient material could be drawn. The students were able to take up on precisely that and to develop it into concrete design proposals in exchange with the pupils.

CZ: Isn’t the bottom line that, despite all of this, the children end up drawing the pictures while the students design the space?

SH: Children think from the very beginning in three-dimensional worlds, which they are already able to describe very well using words. The young client representatives therefore speak about how they would like to be able to feel their environment and the students translate the essence of that into spaces. Models make collaboration easy and perspective drawings can give the pupils an idea of this new world, which they are able to technically examine. The students become the mediators between desire and idea. The pupils are happy with the new fact that they are often expressing self-efficacy for the first time.

CZ: When speaking of space as a third teacher, many warn against designing it too efficaciously. How do you deal with such a supposition?

SH: I think both are needed – responsive and design vision. I am still again and again that our architecture stimulates the children’s imaginations. Critics claim that the children will no longer be able to develop their own fantasies. I experience the opposite because the design is only the beginning, which can be reflected upon, used and shaped.

CZ: In all of this, what becomes of the characteristic style of the architect?

SH: We do not bring a characteristic Baupiloten concept to the table – on the contrary, openess takes us to the ideal school each time. We do, however, salvage certain design decisions for ourselves. The users tell us in what relation the rooms should be placed to one another and we decide what those rooms will look like.

In 2003, Patrick Ostrop set up bof architects in Hamburg. As a young practice, they attracted much attention by winning diverse competitions. A defining feature of the practice is that its approach to architecture derives from the task and context of hand meaning they do not appear to have a signature style.

Carl Zillich: What are the differences if you compare German school buildings with those in other European countries? Patrick Ostrop: I can only really directly compare with Scandinavia – Germany in particular – and they are somewhat ahead of us. A lot of convincing has to be done before teachers will open up to new spatial concepts. Since we became familiar with almost all types of schooling through two projects, I can say that primary schools appear to be further advanced than secondary. In competition tenders, one is often still faced with mere lists of classrooms and access areas. Interest in change still appears to be absent on many levels.

CZ: How do clients, educators, architects and even pupils and parents come together? Are competitions at all adequate when it comes to such complex correlations?

PO: Competition tenders do not involve the schools themselves and are thus tragic, especially when the school administration simply ignores the future users. The knowledge of the teachers in a specific project is decisive, but not all architects are open enough to let users contribute to the process. Perhaps openness when it comes to design also needs to be trained and isn’t necessarily compatible with all approaches to design.

CZ: What do you mean by openness when it comes to design?

PO: Participation is just as important before a competition as after. The structure of the design must outline the competition because it is important that the user can recognize himself in it. From that point of view it is important that the user is adequately involved in the jury. In Wolfsburg, it was apparently a high school student who convinced the consultant adjudicator of the value of our architecture.

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Susanne Hofmann Architects developed a new child-care centre through an intense participatory planning process, which has provided differentiated indoor and outdoor spatial experiences and learning environments since 2012.

The Openness in design

Every project is the result of a complex interplay of ideas and influences, often accompanied by limitations. The architects at Susanne Hofmann Architects strive for a balance between openness and the specific needs of the project. They believe that architecture should be participatory and inclusive, allowing users to shape and develop the design along with the architects. In this way, they aim to create buildings that are truly a reflection of the users’ desires and needs.

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Patrick Ostrop set up bof architects in Hamburg. The practice has won several competitions, including the competition for the new educational centre in Wolfsburg. The building is a reflection of the architects’ participatory approach, where users were involved in the planning process to ensure that the final design meets their needs.

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