

The Extracurricular as an  
Institutional Third Space  
Cristina Mateo

## THE EXTRACURRICULAR AS AN INSTITUTIONAL THIRD SPACE

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Take your average university day in early spring this year. Yes, it was completely different from today's. Then, university life consisted of curricular and extracurricular activities, which took place in different venues within the campus: studios, lecture halls, the library... as well as the in-between spaces such as the canteen, benches, and the many other public places we use to relax and recharge our batteries with other people. What's more, research shows that active learning occurs outside the classroom settings, in informal, ad hoc, spaces (Journal of Facilities Management, 2012).

For many academic institutions, particularly elite establishments like Harvard, Yale, and in Spain, IE University, among others, socialization is key. Attendance, whether as teacher or student, has traditionally provided a means to create a network of colleagues we can build mutual trust with. I believe this is a very important part of career development. That said, a sense of belonging is important within any type of academic institution.

Broadly speaking, students in higher education centers have enjoyed regular curricular academic activity: lectures, workshops, seminars, discussions groups and of course, visits to offices or sites, and in my field, architecture and design, to see what goes on behind the scenes at construction projects. At the same time, attendance at festivals and conferences, have also been part of the curriculum.

Extracurricular activities have traditionally been regarded as a value-added extension to the curriculum, involving study trips to conferences and world events, site visits, exhibitions, lecture series and internships, which extended the value of the syllabus by allowing students to rub shoulders and share their concerns with internationally recognized figures. In the case of our institution, this meant bringing to campus architects such as Kazuyo Sejima, Winy Maas, Ben Van Berkel, Jeanne Gang or Kai Uwe Bergman.

Prior to the advent of COVID-19, campuses around the world were heaving with life, exciting physical and symbolic spaces where the sheer fact of proximity compelled people to engage with each other. Chance and serendipitous encounters sparked new opportunities for discovery and creativity: collaboration, networking and learning from each other and the outside community. They were the equivalent to what garages represented in the early days of Silicon Valley.

With the advent of COVID-19, many of these dynamics been changed and adapted, often without interrupting courses and activities for a single day. The disruption caused by the Coronavirus pandemic has required a rapid response from universities in the struggle to continue teaching. The

way we interact on campus changed, and consequently, our role as educators has too. We have had to ask ourselves how higher education institutions can remain effective. Do we need to redesign our campuses and by the same token, our role as educators? What is our new role going to be?

## **A Time for Seeking and Sharing Interaction**

During the COVID-19 lockdown, we were able to adapt quickly thanks to the involvement of the school community: members: students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

By mid-March 2020, many schools and universities had adapted 100% to remote online access. International institutions such as my own carried out this process under lockdown, with students and faculty scattered in different locations: a task not without its technological challenges. The closure of campus meant shutting down not just classrooms and studios but also libraries, canteens, all the other spaces we traditionally gathered.

Interestingly enough, during this period, there was a high number of faculty- and student-driven initiatives, aimed simply at staying in touch. The key was seeking contact and maintaining a sense of belonging.

The established protocols and platforms for curricular delivery were often complemented by the rapid implementation of parallel platforms, mostly led by students. Entire exhibition galleries on Instagram were set up as a way to present students' projects. Instagram was a natural medium for them, and faculty was happily surprised as we realized that at the height of confinement we were able to review students' projects from our smartphones:

<https://www.instagram.com/jointsarticulations/>

In parallel, academia seemed more open and happier than ever to share with the world. In the field of architecture and design, many initiatives and best practices were shared online:

<https://www.acsa-arch.org/resources/faculty-resources/covid-19-response-and-resources/>  
(ACSA)

This also happened in the industry. Professionals seemed more than happy to share their experiences in adapting to the new Covid-19 situation and the challenges they faced when working remotely. Regular updates were available through specialized media: [Architect Magazine](#) and [Architectural Record](#).

At the same time, art galleries and museums, as well as festivals and specialized annual events

scheduled to take place in 2020, were either postponed (Salone del Mobile Milano) or delivered online, thanks to a growing range of digital platforms, just a click away, offering free online registration: [Knowledge of Design Week](#) or [World Architecture Festival](#).

This open approach facilitated community engagement and outreach, while virtual encounters removed entry barriers to participation, rather than only letting in only those belonging to a particular institution, invitees, or those who had paid a (usually) high fee.

## **The Extracurricular in the New Academic Year**

During the global lockdown it became apparent that this new, anytime-anywhere approach had created the opportunity to create new shared spaces with the involvement of everyone who was part of the community, and had contributed to solving the problems at hand with a sense of social responsibility. By and large, educators felt the need to contribute by helping with the immediate and most urgent tasks. There were plenty of bottom-up initiatives in support of local hospitals, while local communities shared a commitment to a culture of active partnership with institutions. Universities improved their status and felt integrated with the stakeholders in the communities they were based in.

At the same time, it was noticeable that once curriculums were removed from the constraints of time and place (sessions were online and often recorded to allow access to those in different time zones), the extracurricular took on a heightened importance.

Whereas traditionally, the curriculum largely dictated what happened on and off campus, with downtime to relax and connect, taking place in those in-between spaces, all this was now happening in the virtual world, through Whatsapp, Teams, Instagram or Twitter. These were the spaces where people had the opportunity to connect, share and also learn, blurring the lines between what curricular and extracurricular has traditionally meant.

In architecture and design, final project presentations were presented digitally to supervisors connected online, free from the constraints of having to be physically face-to-face. Instead of three dimensional models, digital representations could now be used. Also, students and supervisors were together in a mixed environment, some physically in the classroom (once initial lockdown measures were relaxed), and others virtually. Furthermore, lectures turned into group work and tutorials, where students could benefit from closer contact with faculty through virtual office hours, while field trips that before had been used to illustrate real-life work were now substituted by live video with

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professors providing explanations and notes. Even virtual coffee sessions with industry experts, formerly constrained to certain times and protocols (for students requiring credits etc.) were freed and became an aim in themselves.

It soon became evident that those involved in education were not only adapting content, but also developing new ways of interaction for the in-between, for the new, anywhere-any time framework.



When discussing design and architectural education at university level, we often refer to campus life, studio life, or the unique nature of architecture & design programs: rich discursive, collaborative, and interdisciplinary. This has largely been built on a spatial strategy and a unique mode of interaction, based on the 24-hour culture of the Design Studio and design critique. A physical and, at

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the same time, symbolic third space where students and peers spend time developing their projects, discussing ideas, in an ongoing iteration which involves analysis, testing, refining, innovation, and retesting.

At my institution, IE School of Architecture and Design, as well as in many other architecture and design schools, this is complemented by the Fab Lab, a space for co-creation, a digital fabrication space, with a timetable compatible with the needs of students to allow them to experiment with ideas and prototypes, explore the possibilities of new and traditional materials, and to develop a culture of making things. In terms of architectural and design education, the Design Studio and studio life, as well as the Fab Lab, are quintessential. In essence, they are also third spaces.

But now, design classes do not just take place in the Design Studio, they also take place online, through software applications such as Miro, as well as through group projects, bringing students together on-site and online, allowing them to assume different roles while being part of one project that receives feedback through different interfaces and/or different formats. The key is knowing that students need to acquire autonomy to be able to make informed decisions about their projects.

At the same time, projects happen anytime, anywhere, while academic sessions are comprised of synchronous on-site and remote sessions, along with asynchronous learning experiences.

Under this model, visits and study trips can be performed virtually, with either a few students on site or simply via a colleague able to perform and record a tour, highlighting the relevant aspects for later review, and all aimed at fostering collaboration.

At the same time, lecture series are open to all, benefiting from the input of a network of leading professionals who are no longer bound by the limits of their location.

When thinking openly about the in-between and the extracurricular, we started consciously building our community inward and outward, and what at first seemed ad hoc and purely operational turned highly strategic and redefined our role as educators in higher education. The extracurricular were those in-between spaces, those third spaces that sociology had been talking about for a long time now. They are in-between symbolic and physical spaces that endorse our identities and sense of belonging. They are the cement that make for sustainable and resilient urban living.

In 1989, US Sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the term "third space," to refer to a place that is neither the home (the first space), or work (the second space). It is a space where people gather and interact, neutral and welcoming, to which people tend to return and for which they develop a natural

sense of belonging. Similarly, social theorists Edward Soja (1996) and Homi K. Bhabha (1990) described the third space as one of transition, a non-physical place, where hybrid identifications are possible and where cultural transformations can happen during the course of everyday activities.

Interestingly, this notion of third spaces has been used within the context of higher education settings where certain gender and ethnic faculty and students feel underrepresented, finding these spaces as the ideal place to show themselves.

## **Universities as Institutional Third Spaces**

In the COVID-19 age, universities need to become third spaces that can enhance human interaction and build a sense of belonging.

The idea of turning campuses into third spaces is nothing new. Architecture firms have already worked on designing the so-called campus of the future (UN Studio is designing the TU Delft, University of Technology in the Netherlands), to be ready by 2021. Its principle stated objectives are to offer flexible ways of learning and to emphasize in-between spaces. Moreover, from now on, what happens before, during, or after class becomes equally important, and from September 2020, there will be a mix of students on-site and online in most places.

The truth is that for the 5G generation, which already lives according to anywhere-anytime, disruption has come not from moving classes to virtual environments, but from moving the physical campus as a symbolic place to interact and belong to a virtual, informal context, questioning traditional links with peers, faculty and staff and alumni (their community to be).

Perhaps there are other experiences that architecture and design schools can share with their peers in other academic institutions. I hope that the studio environment that was already taking on the role of a third space can also provide a critical cohesive element beyond architectural programs, offering an opportunity for interaction, discussion and belonging to faculty, students and staff in other schools.

We have adapted site visits and exhibitions in a bid to expand academic content and create community links with outside partners and expand academic, professional and stakeholder networks, (institutional and well as private). The same applies to any lab approach, which often engages with outside partners, such as city councils, NGOs, as well as private partners. It will be with them with whom projects of interest for the host community (rooted at the same time in a network society) can be developed.

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All this not only supports interdisciplinary discourse, but also builds stronger academic, professional and stakeholder networks, contributing overall to a stronger community. In short, this idea of a third space expands the role of university education and helps define the unique DNA of any institution through the recognition of its ability to build a resilient community and guide them in the exchange of ideas between students, faculty, staff, and alumni with other institutions, and above all, with the outside world, a diverse network/community of actors engaged in the domains of shared interests.

If we can share this goal, we will attain a much longed-for sense of belonging. All the ingredients for making this happen already exist. Our role as educators in the COVID-19 age will be that of a community enabler.

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