

Transcultural Methodologies for Architectural Beginnings: Integrating European Teaching Traditions in a Global Classroom

Sandro Rolla

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, PRC

sandro.rolla@xjtlu.edu.cn

0009-0003-1351-1088

Abstract: This paper explores the transcultural adaptation of European architectural teaching methodologies within the ARC102 Small-Scale Architectural Design module at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) in Suzhou, China. Rooted in foundational pedagogical theories, ARC102 introduces first-year students to architectural design through a progressive, process-oriented structure, from conceptual exercises to site-specific proposals.

A key feature of the module is its balance between rigour and creative freedom, enabling students to develop personal design languages within a clear methodological framework. The studio becomes a space of collective experimentation, shaped by the cultural diversity of both students and tutors.

The paper highlights the full-cycle nature of the design process, which includes urban analysis, spatial composition, environmental and structural strategies, and architectural communication. Despite the challenge, over 95% of students complete the process, producing coherent design portfolios. The public final exhibition showcases a large volume of work and strengthens a shared sense of participation.

A pivotal moment is The Stage, a performative and pedagogical event in Week 5 that transforms the school courtyard into a space for dialogue, experimentation, and interdisciplinary exchange. This initiative bridges the analytical and propositional phases of the course, reinforcing its community-oriented dimension.

Student outcomes demonstrate strong growth in autonomy, critical thinking, and communication. The experience suggests that European pedagogies not only adapt but are enriched when reinterpreted in new cultural contexts.

ARC102 emerges as a potential model for global design education, where methodological clarity, cultural dialogue, and shared learning drive innovation in architectural teaching.

Keywords: Transcultural Pedagogy; architectural design education; process-oriented methodology; critical design thinking; performative pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Architectural education is increasingly challenged to operate across cultural, disciplinary, and institutional boundaries. In an era defined by global interconnection, the formation of architects can no longer rely solely on the transmission of technical knowledge or historical precedents. Instead, it must become a space for critical and situated experimentation (Dewey, 1938)—one that enables students to engage with social, environmental, and material complexity while developing their own design language (Pérez-Gómez, 1983).

Within this scenario lies the experience of ARC102 Small-Scale Architectural Design, the foundational design module for first-year architecture students at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) in Suzhou, China. Conducted in a highly multicultural and multilingual academic context, ARC102 represents the students' first comprehensive encounter with architectural design. The course guides them through a structured process that spans site analysis, spatial strategies, tectonic thinking, and architectural communication.

The pedagogical model adopted in ARC102 is grounded in European teaching traditions—particularly those developed in Italy, Switzerland, and Spain—but is constantly reinterpreted in dialogue with the Chinese context and its specificities. Rather than applying a fixed methodology, the course proposes a transcultural approach, where inherited pedagogical structures are tested, transformed, and reactivated through local conditions, collective experimentation, and feedback from diverse student cohorts (Salama & Wilkinson, 2007; Latour, 2005).

The reflection presented in this paper focuses on this process of methodological translation: how a European design pedagogy oriented around sequence, critical reflection, and spatial experimentation can be both challenged and enriched when relocated into a global classroom. Through the case of ARC102, the paper proposes a framework for architectural education that integrates structure and openness, process and performance, theory and lived experience (Smith, 2023).

2. Theoretical context and methodological references

The approach chosen for ARC102 stems from a constant dialogue between fundamental theoretical references and concrete methodological experiences developed in the European context, yet open to contamination and reinterpretation. This interplay between theory and practice has allowed the development of a didactic model capable of adapting and transforming within a multicultural environment such as China.

One of the key theoretical foundations is the work of John Dewey, who conceives education as a process of lived experience, in which knowledge arises from active engagement and direct reflection. This pedagogical stance, which merges doing with learning, is particularly relevant to architectural design, where students are invited to participate fully in the creative process rather than only observe or analyse. The design studio thus becomes a transformative space of personal and collective development.

A second conceptual axis emerges from the work of authors such as Alberto Pérez-Gómez, who interprets architecture as a cultural and poetic act—capable of expressing and shaping the human condition. This understanding reinforces the idea that architecture, far from being reduced to technical efficiency, operates as a symbolic and experiential practice, especially relevant in transcultural environments like XJTU, where students are encouraged to discover and articulate their own design language across diverse traditions.

Other significant influences can be found in the European academic panorama. Franco Purini's contribution highlights design education as a process of disciplinary construction, where form, theory, and context intersect to generate meaning. Similarly, the positions developed by Ernesto Nathan Rogers and Giancarlo De Carlo foreground architecture's civic responsibility and its ability to interpret and transform social space. Their emphasis on reading context as an active component of the design process resonates with the ambitions of ARC102.

The legacy of the so-called "Ticino School" offers another important reference. Through a typological approach influenced by Aldo Rossi, the school advocates for historical continuity and for a collective understanding of form. Typology is not considered a rigid model but a cognitive instrument to investigate the cultural and urban fabric. In parallel, the Swiss tradition, aligned with Germanic sensitivity, has long privileged materiality, structure, and tectonic articulation. The work of Peter Zumthor exemplifies this approach by demonstrating how construction details and material choices evoke emotional and atmospheric resonance, establishing a corporeal relationship with space.

From the Spanish context, the experimental research of Jorge Oteiza explores the dialogue between mass and void, proposing spatial strategies that activate perceptual dynamics and experiential depth. His work offers students tools to think architecture beyond function and program, engaging with space as a living medium.

A foundational figure for the course structure and sequencing of ARC102 is Bernhard Hoesli, whose pedagogical innovations at ETH Zurich continue to influence design teaching across Europe. Hoesli advocated for a progressive design education, beginning with abstract and spatial exercises and gradually transitioning toward typological, contextual, and material complexity. His emphasis on process and on architecture as a language to be critically learned and interpreted underpins the organisation of ARC102's phases and reviews. The structure of the course—its progression from conceptual site analysis to architectural definition—echoes Hoesli's method of layering complexity through learning-by-doing.

These theoretical and methodological perspectives find concrete expression within the framework of IncipitLab and The Stage. IncipitLab operates as a collective platform for comparative research among architecture schools, focusing on foundational design education through workshops, discussions, and experimentation. The Stage, in contrast, provides a performative and immersive format: a temporary

environment where lectures, hands-on activities, and artistic events disrupt the routine of the studio, fostering new forms of engagement and exchange. Both initiatives share the intention of transforming the design studio into a more open, adaptive, and context-sensitive learning environment.

In recent years, the ARC102 module has also drawn from more contemporary theoretical frameworks that expand and refine its pedagogical base. Actor-Network Theory, as developed by Bruno Latour and others, offers a productive lens through which the design studio can be understood as a network of interacting human and non-human agents. Students, tutors, models, drawings, materials, and digital tools are all seen as co-constructors of knowledge and experience. This perspective encourages the view that design learning emerges from distributed agency, rather than from isolated authorship.

The influence of live project pedagogy, as developed in recent architectural education discourse, is also evident. Temporary interventions and site-specific installations, particularly during *The Stage* week, simulate the conditions of real-world practice, anchoring design tasks in urgency, materiality, and context. These experiences build upon methods of learning by doing and promote collaborative modes of feedback between students and tutors. Instead of issuing top-down critiques, tutors act as co-investigators—fostering a shared space of reflection, negotiation, and experimentation.

The synthesis of these references defines ARC102's identity: a teaching framework that embraces constraint and freedom, disciplinary structure and local specificity. The challenge lies in adapting a European process-oriented methodology to the cultural richness of the Chinese academic context—transforming difference into a generative ground for architectural exploration and student growth.

3. The ARC102 module at XJTLU

3.1. Objectives and Structure

The ARC102 module represents a foundational and decisive moment within the academic journey of first-year students at XJTLU. In a highly international and multicultural context, ARC102 becomes a space not only for technical learning but also for cultural exchange, where architectural design is interpreted as a critical tool and a means of identity exploration.

The main objective of the course is to progressively introduce students to the complexity of architectural design, proposing a rigorous path while remaining open to experimentation and personal reflection. The module is structured over 13 weeks, during which students complete a full design cycle—from site reading to spatial and constructive definition—resulting in a coherent architectural proposal.

The pedagogical structure is organised into four major Sections, each addressing a different thematic component of the design process. These Sections are subdivided into seven Phases, which describe more specific operational strategies and learning outcomes. Each Phase corresponds to a weekly or bi-weekly focus, and together they form a cumulative sequence that reinforces methodological coherence.

Section 1: Foundational Explorations

Focused on early abstraction, site immersion, and critical thinking, this section includes three phases:

Preparatory Basic Material (Achievement 1: Develop high-quality reference material essential for the design process).

Reading, Reflecting, Writing (Achievement 2: Analyse the project's urban context, identifying strengths and weaknesses as a foundation for design exploration).

Testing the Site (Achievement 3: Evaluate site-specific responses to strategic urban interventions, forming an initial Urban Concept).

This section culminates in the First Interim Review, typically by Week 4.

Section 2: Architectural Form and Spatial Typologies

Focused on formal definition and programmatic articulation:

Theme (Achievement 4: Develop an understanding of housing typologies and spatial programming).

Species of Spaces (Achievement 5: Explore spatial qualities through form manipulation, sensory engagement, and atmosphere, emphasising architectural research and language).

This section is supported by references to domestic space, proportion, and phenomenological readings (Zumthor, 2006), and leads into Week 5, which is devoted to *The Stage*.

Section 3: Materiality and Construction

Dedicated to constructional logic and tectonics:

Materiality (Achievement 6: Refine understanding of tectonic principles, construction methods, and architectural detailing).

Section 4: Architectural Communication and Exhibition

Dedicated to the development of representational clarity and public engagement:

Communicate (Achievement 7: Master architectural communication through drawing, modelling, and digital visualisation, fostering a distinct design identity).

This final section culminates in the Final Review and Live Exhibition, hosted during Week 13. The exhibition is conceived not only as a form of assessment but also as a collective public ritual, recalling the civic dimension of architectural practice (De Carlo, 1992).

The methodological progression, detailed in the Module Handbook, builds a structured sequence of synthesis and verification. Each Section is associated with a major interim review or exhibition moment, while the Phases establish weekly goals and ensure continuity of effort. The clear articulation of expectations allows tutors to guide students effectively and enables students to monitor their progress through tangible outputs (Hoesli, 1987).

Most importantly, the ARC102 structure shifts the emphasis away from prematurely judging architectural quality toward the ability to complete a full design process. For first-year students, many of whom have no prior design experience, the central challenge is not necessarily producing excellent architecture, but developing the critical, technical, and reflective capacities required to complete the process coherently. In this respect, the results are exceptional: over 95% of students successfully complete all phases of the course, producing a full set of deliverables that include conceptual diagrams, site analyses, spatial schemes, technical details, and exhibition-ready panels.

The required deliverables are highly structured and standardised, enabling a fair and focused final assessment. Each student submits a consistent set of presentation panels and physical models, facilitating comparison and helping tutors concentrate on the design content rather than on stylistic or graphic variation. This standardisation also supports equity, clarity, and collective identity within the studio group (Smith, 2023).

In recent editions, the course has involved over 240 students, each producing up to 16 panels and 5 physical models at various scales. The final exhibition spans multiple rooms and corridors of the Department of Architecture, generating an immersive and public event that often attracts visitors from outside the university. These exhibitions not only demonstrate individual achievement but also act as ritual moments of transition and belonging, reinforcing the sense of community and shared endeavour among students (Harriss & Widder, 2014; Salama & Wilkinson, 2007).

3.2. Teaching Methodologies and Tools

ARC102 distances itself from traditional frontal lectures, preferring an active and immersive learning mode. Teaching sessions often consist of multiple contributions from different tutors, addressing both theoretical and practical issues in a dynamic and concise format. This structure reflects the communication styles of contemporary multimedia content and helps students stay engaged. The emphasis on learning through doing, in short cycles of feedback and iteration, echoes pedagogical strategies grounded in experiential education (Dewey, 1938; Salama & Wilkinson, 2007).

Studio work is conducted in small tutorial groups, fostering close interaction between students and tutors. The cultural heterogeneity of the teaching staff—comprising educators from diverse international backgrounds—generates a plurality of perspectives that enrich the learning environment and encourage students to engage with critique and design from multiple viewpoints. This dialogic structure resonates with contemporary models of collaborative pedagogy (Smith, 2023), where the studio becomes a collective and iterative space of investigation.

To preserve coherence across such a large teaching team, the weekly structure and centralised guidelines are essential. Each Phase begins with an operational briefing, outlining key concepts, required outputs, and

technical parameters. Weekly questions such as “How do we proceed?” and “What do we integrate?” guide student work and reinforce the logic of sequence. This procedural clarity draws from models such as those implemented by Hoesli (1987), where rigour and progression are seen as tools for unlocking creative potential.

The pin-up reviews serve as structured rituals of collective discussion and feedback. In parallel, Spark Workshops provide transversal skills—from physical model-making to digital visualisation and diagramming—supporting the core design work with technical and conceptual tools. These workshops echo methods found in the live project tradition, where making and thinking are integrated (Harriss & Widder, 2014).

The integration of ARC102 with other first-year modules (ARC103 Environmental Science, ARC107 History of Western Architecture, ARC110 Humanities and Architecture) allows for horizontal learning across disciplines. This coordination supports the development of a multi-layered design culture from the outset of the academic journey.

The digital platform LM-Core plays a crucial role in managing the complexity of this structure, offering real-time access to weekly briefs, updated reference material, and student submissions. This transparency ensures alignment across tutorial groups and enables students to self-direct their work more confidently. From a pedagogical perspective, this infrastructure supports distributed agency across human and non-human actors, as interpreted through Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005).

The final deliverable—submitted in Week 13—is not merely a project, but a complete narrative. It includes the student’s spatial concept, urban rationale, typological studies, tectonic strategies, and visual language. The public exhibition (Figure 1) functions as a performative and celebratory moment, marking both the end of the semester and the passage into a more advanced stage of architectural thinking. This moment echoes the idea of architecture as a civic and relational act (De Carlo, 1992), reaffirming the connection between design, communication, and the public sphere.



Figure 1: Special settings designed for the Final Review (source: Rolla, 2025)

4. Implementation and challenges

The implementation of ARC102 revealed a series of complex and stimulating challenges, stemming primarily from the scale of the course and the heterogeneity of its teaching team. With a cohort often exceeding 200 students and a tutorial staff composed of professionals and academics from diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, the need to build a shared language became a crucial and ongoing task.

Each tutor brings a distinct approach to critique and pedagogy, often shaped by national traditions and institutional cultures. This diversity is a strength, but it also requires a carefully structured framework to ensure consistency. The coordination of the course is based on a combination of centralised planning and distributed responsibility. Weekly meetings are held with all tutors to discuss the next phase, review progress, and agree on evaluation criteria. These meetings serve not only as administrative moments, but as spaces of methodological co-design, where the values and goals of the course are negotiated and refined in real time. As proposed in the literature on studio pedagogy, building a shared culture among instructors is essential to maintaining coherence in large-scale design studios (Salama & Wilkinson, 2007).

To support this collective effort, the weekly organisation of ARC102 follows a highly structured calendar. Each Phase begins with a shared introductory session, followed by tutorial activities and pin-up reviews. Templates, deliverables, and examples are provided across all groups to maintain alignment and fairness. However, the framework is not rigid: tutors are encouraged to interpret the weekly briefs through their own

disciplinary lenses, so long as the core trajectory of the course is respected. This balance between rigour and interpretive openness reflects the pedagogical ethos of the module itself and resonates with earlier European approaches to design teaching (Hoesli, 1987).

A particularly challenging aspect is managing the intensity of the 13-week semester, which leaves little room for hesitation or error. Students are expected to produce a continuous stream of work, moving from abstract explorations to detailed proposals in just three months. While this can be daunting, the clarity of structure helps them remain focused. Each week has a clear goal and outcome, and the students develop the ability to self-evaluate and adjust their design process in real time. This is perhaps one of the most significant learning outcomes of ARC102: the internalisation of design as a rhythmic and recursive process, grounded in reflection and iteration (Dewey, 1938).

A pivotal moment of the semester is Week 5, which marks the transition from conceptual analysis to architectural proposition. This moment is marked by *The Stage*, a performative and pedagogical event conceived as a temporary transformation of the learning environment. Designed and realised within the inner courtyard of the Department of Architecture, *The Stage* is a flexible structure—a covered platform, a place for assembly, a field of experimentation. It is at once a physical space and a symbolic device, representing a break from routine and a shift in tempo.

The idea behind *The Stage* is to create a public and open-ended arena where students, tutors, and guests can interact beyond the limits of the studio desk. During this special week, no standard tutorials are held. Instead, the courtyard becomes the site for a curated sequence of lectures, performances, workshops, and informal exchanges. Students attend sessions led by visiting architects and artists, participate in thematic workshops on photography, body and space, digital tools, and architectural analysis, and take part in installations, readings, or even film screenings. This format recalls approaches developed in experimental pedagogies where the boundaries between making, thinking, and performing are intentionally blurred (Harris & Widder, 2014).

At its core, *The Stage* serves as a pedagogical hinge between the analytical and the design phases of the course. Students are encouraged to reflect on what has been done so far and to reframe it as the foundation for their upcoming architectural proposal. In practical terms, this means producing a conceptual volumetric model that articulates a strategic response to the site—one that integrates environmental, social, and cultural dimensions and anticipates further spatial development.

Importantly, *The Stage* is not conceived as a break from the course, but as a ritual acceleration—a moment of immersion that condenses multiple forms of knowledge and opens new trajectories. The informal atmosphere and shared intensity of this week strengthen the social fabric of the course, creating bonds among students and fostering a sense of belonging. It is not uncommon to see students working late, discussing ideas over shared meals, or reusing elements of *The Stage* as part of their final installation. These elements evoke the performative and atmospheric qualities of architectural space, echoing a sensibility explored in contemporary phenomenological practices (Zumthor, 2006).

Over three academic years, *The Stage* (Figure 2) has evolved from a side experiment into a recognised and anticipated part of the curriculum. It now stands as a model of how design education can incorporate performativity, collaboration, and atmosphere into the pedagogical sequence. The space created by *The Stage* is ephemeral, but the experiences and connections it generates have lasting effects—both on the students' projects and on their identity as future designers (Smith, 2023).

In sum, the implementation of ARC102 has demonstrated that when structure is combined with flexibility, and when method is paired with openness, even highly diverse learning environments can become coherent and creative platforms for architectural exploration. The complexity of the course is not an obstacle but a resource—a reflection of the world for which architects must be prepared (De Carlo, 1992; Latour, 2005).



Figure 2: The Stage, 2024-25 edition (source: Rolla, 2024)

5. Results and feedback

The outcomes emerging from the ARC102 module confirm the effectiveness of an approach that combines methodological rigour, experimental openness, and attention to transcultural dimensions. Starting from early exercises in site analysis and spatial reasoning, students progressively developed autonomous design capabilities, gaining both technical competence and poetic awareness (Pérez-Gómez, 1983; Zumthor, 2006).

One of the most remarkable results of the module lies in the students' capacity to complete a full-cycle architectural process. Despite being in their first year and having little or no prior design experience, over 95% of students consistently achieve the full sequence of deliverables, from urban readings to spatial concept, from material and structural strategies to final drawings and models. This level of completeness is not only an indicator of discipline and engagement, but also of the clarity and accessibility of the methodological structure (Hoesli, 1987).

The pedagogical emphasis is not placed on architectural quality as an aesthetic end, but on the ability to sustain a design process across different stages and scales. The value of ARC102 resides in the students' gradual internalisation of design as a process of thinking, making, and reflecting—an educational philosophy rooted in experiential learning traditions (Dewey, 1938; Salama & Wilkinson, 2007). Throughout the semester, students are confronted with clear weekly tasks, structured Phases, and consistent review points, enabling them to build confidence and progressively take ownership of their work.

The Final Review and Live Exhibition, held in Week 13, is not simply a moment of assessment, but a public celebration of process. Each student is required to submit a consistent set of 16 panels, including abstract studies, site analysis, design development, tectonic explorations, and atmospheric renderings. Alongside these, they produce at least five physical models, ranging from massing studies to detailed structural mock-ups. The panels are printed and mounted on identical templates, allowing for equitable comparison and a unified graphic identity across the cohort (Smith, 2023).

In recent years, the final exhibition has included work from over 240 students, requiring the transformation of the entire ground floor of the architecture building into a linear gallery stretching across several corridors and spaces (Figure 3). Visitors are invited to walk through what amounts to a kilometre of architectural drawings, interspersed with three-dimensional installations. The exhibition has attracted faculty, students from other departments, external guests, and even family members—turning the critique into a collective and performative ritual. These shared events reinforce architecture's public dimension and its capacity to generate meaning through display and interaction (De Carlo, 1992; Oteiza, 1957).

The standardisation of formats—in both layout and content—enables the teaching team to evaluate projects fairly and efficiently. Rather than focusing on subjective presentation choices, tutors can assess the substance of each project and track the development of key aspects such as spatial articulation, contextual response, material choices, and communication clarity. The process also helps students focus on content rather than visual tricks, and encourages them to develop a critical eye for architectural representation (Purini, 2000).

Beyond the exhibition, the final feedback system plays a significant pedagogical role. Each student receives an individualised written evaluation based on a shared rubric aligned with the module's Learning Outcomes. These evaluations include strengths, weaknesses, and targeted comments for future growth. In a teaching environment where large class sizes can limit individual attention, the feedback sheets serve as a space of pedagogical intimacy, offering detailed reflections on each student's journey (Smith, 2023; Harriss & Widder, 2014).

Reviewing the collected feedback, several patterns emerge:

- Students demonstrate growing capacity to handle spatial complexity, especially when moving from site-scale strategies to architectural typologies.
- Many develop a nuanced sense of tectonic logic, connecting structural and material decisions to conceptual intentions.
- A majority succeed in articulating a personal representational style, balancing analytical clarity with atmospheric sensitivity.

At the same time, challenges persist. Some students rely too heavily on rendering software, losing control over architectural clarity; others struggle to integrate social and sustainability considerations beyond formal

gestures. These recurrent themes are discussed within the teaching team and often addressed through adjustments in the following academic cycle (Latour, 2005).

Finally, the effect of *The Stage* on student performance is especially noteworthy. Many of the most articulate and coherent final projects can trace their turning point back to Week 5, when students moved from abstraction to architectural intent. The shared energy and exposure to diverse inputs during *The Stage* often lead to a leap in confidence and clarity. Student reflections collected after the semester frequently cite *The Stage* as the moment when “everything came together” or when they “finally felt like architects.” The importance of this performative interlude is a testament to the value of integrating atmosphere, ritual, and openness into the educational journey (Harriss & Widder, 2014; Zumthor, 2006).

In conclusion, the results of ARC102 are not only measurable in terms of deliverables or marks but also in the transformative journey of the students. From the initial anxiety of facing the unknown to the final pride of exhibiting their work, the module enables students to build a foundational relationship with architecture—not only as a discipline of form, but as a process of cultural engagement and intellectual growth (Dewey, 1938; Pérez-Gómez, 1983).



Figure 3: Final Critic, 2023-24/2024-25 (source: Rolla, 2023)

6. Discussion

The experience of ARC102 demonstrates how a process-oriented, rigorously structured, and theoretically grounded European teaching approach can not only adapt to a transcultural context such as China but also draw from it new energies, challenges, and insights. The implementation of the module reveals that architectural education—when framed as an evolving, participatory, and situated process—can transcend the limitations of cultural boundaries and disciplinary silos (De Carlo, 1992; Salama & Wilkinson, 2007).

A central challenge in a multicultural classroom is to reconcile diverse understandings of what design is and how it should be taught. In this regard, ARC102 does not impose a single vision but offers a shared procedural structure capable of accommodating different critical traditions. Tutors from diverse backgrounds engage in a continual negotiation of meaning with students, modelling a reflective and pluralistic design culture. This dynamic aligns with the idea of the studio as a space for reflection-in-action, where knowledge is generated through conversation and adaptation (Schön, in Salama & Wilkinson, 2007).

At the same time, the modular and phased organisation of ARC102 allows for controlled freedom. Students are given precise weekly goals, but the path they take to achieve them is open to interpretation. This pedagogical logic fosters responsibility and encourages learning through doing—a core principle in the tradition of John Dewey (1938). Students are not passive recipients of knowledge; they are active agents in a project that gradually becomes their own. This echoes the idea of the design studio as a field of situated experience, where method and invention are tightly interwoven (Hoesli, 1987; Smith, 2023).

The course also provides a platform for what can be called epistemological mediation—a term that describes how conflicting or divergent value systems, teaching cultures, and representational codes are not only acknowledged but made to interact productively. Within this framework, transculturality is not a constraint, but a condition of learning: a space of openness, uncertainty, and potential innovation. This stance draws from broader reflections on the performative and adaptive nature of architectural knowledge (Pérez-Gómez, 1983; Zumthor, 2006).

The role of *The Stage* is emblematic in this regard. As a temporary intervention in the physical and temporal structure of the course, it suspends routine and activates new forms of interaction. It reinforces the idea of architecture as both a spatial and social practice—one that unfolds not only in drawings, but in performances, conversations, and shared experiences. Here, the studio becomes what Latour (2005) would describe as a network of heterogeneous elements—people, models, panels, screens, gestures, concepts—through which architecture is enacted, not just represented.

Similarly, the final exhibition embodies the performative dimension of design education. By transforming a technical deadline into a public event, it reframes the project as an act of communication and participation. The space of the school becomes a temporary city of drawings, an infrastructure for shared meaning, memory, and recognition. The standardisation of outputs ensures comparability, but the diversity of ideas within the same framework affirms the richness of individual voices (Harriss & Widder, 2014; Smith, 2023).

From a pedagogical standpoint, the studio operates as a live project—not in the sense of building for external clients, but in its temporality, intensity, and reality effect. Students must make decisions under pressure, negotiate trade-offs, and articulate their ideas convincingly—all while remaining open to critique and uncertainty. This simulates the dynamics of real practice while remaining grounded in a space of guided experimentation (Salama & Wilkinson, 2007; Harriss & Widder, 2014).

Finally, the collaborative nature of tutorials and reviews reflects elements of co-design methodology. Feedback sessions are not moments of unilateral judgment but collective conversations. Tutors guide without dictating, helping students to recognise the consequences of their choices and refine their design thinking. These sessions become spaces of mutual learning, where knowledge is constructed dialogically, not transmitted vertically (Smith, 2023).

In sum, ARC102 contributes to the international debate on architectural pedagogy by offering a model of structured openness: a framework that is methodologically robust yet culturally sensitive, that supports individual agency while fostering collective belonging. Its success lies not only in the quality of student outputs, but in the transformation of the studio into a community of practice, where architecture is taught not as a fixed canon, but as a living, adaptive, and relational process (De Carlo, 1992; Pérez-Gómez, 1983; Latour, 2005).



Figure 4: Lecture at *The Stage*. (source: Rolla, 2023)

7. Conclusions

The ARC102 module offers concrete evidence of how it is possible to construct a learning path that integrates theoretical depth, methodological clarity, and transcultural sensitivity within the context of first-year architectural education. Grounded in European teaching traditions yet shaped by continuous adaptation to a global classroom, the module demonstrates that structure and openness are not opposing forces but complementary pedagogical tools (Hoesli, 1987; Salama & Wilkinson, 2007).

The strength of the approach lies not only in the quality of the final design outputs but also in the students' capacity to engage with the entire architectural process. From initial abstraction to site analysis, from typological reasoning to tectonic definition and public presentation, ARC102 enables students to navigate the complexity of architectural thinking in a sequential and reflective way. The process itself becomes a space of learning, transformation, and agency—an approach aligned with the philosophy of Dewey (1938), who viewed education

as life in action, and with Pérez-Gómez (1983), who emphasised architecture's cultural and experiential dimensions.

Through its phased structure, diversified teaching methods, and experimental platforms such as The Stage, the module fosters a studio environment that encourages both individual exploration and collective responsibility. The diversity of tutors and students is not treated as a challenge to overcome, but as a resource for expanding architectural culture and rethinking the terms of design education (De Carlo, 1992; Smith, 2023).

The outcomes of the course suggest that transcultural design pedagogy is not only viable but essential in today's educational landscape. When students learn to situate their work within a multiplicity of perspectives, they become more agile, critical, and resilient as future designers. The studio becomes a site of negotiation between contexts, codes, and meanings—where architectural knowledge is not transmitted but constructed (Latour, 2005).

Looking ahead, ARC102 can serve as a prototype for reimagining architectural education in other international contexts. Its emphasis on structured process, reflective practice, and performative engagement offers a transferable model for cultivating design awareness across cultural boundaries. Most importantly, it positions education itself as a living practice, where architecture is not only taught, but enacted, shared, and continually redefined (Harriss & Widder, 2014; Zumthor, 2006).



Figure 5: Poster (source: Rolla, 2024)

References

- De Carlo, G. (1992). *Architecture's public: The transformation of a discipline*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Free Press.
- Harriss, H., & Widder, L. (Eds.). (2014). *Architecture live projects: Pedagogy into practice*. London: Routledge.
- Hoesli, B. (1987). *Teaching architecture: The didactic experience of Bernhard Hoesli at the ETH Zurich* (A. M. Vogt & A. Campo Baeza, Eds.). Zürich: ETH Zürich.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oteiza, J. (1957). *Propósito experimental*. Madrid: Museo Oteiza.
- Pérez-Gómez, A. (1983). *Architecture and the crisis of modern science*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Purini, F. (2000). *Comporre l'architettura*. Bari: Laterza.
- Rogers, E. N. (1958). *Esperienza dell'architettura*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Salama, A. M., & Wilkinson, N. (Eds.). (2007). *Design studio pedagogy: Horizons for the future*. Gateshead: Urban International Press.
- Smith, C. (Ed.). (2023). *Progressive studio pedagogy: Examples from architecture and allied design fields*. London: Routledge.
- Zumthor, P. (2006). *Thinking architecture*. Basel: Birkhäuser.