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N 02

INUJIMA: ARCHITECTURE BECOMES ENVIRONMENT



Inujima: Architecture Becomes Environment

Selected Projects from
Kazuyo Sejima's Design Studio,
2015 - 2019

Advanced Architectural Design Studio
Professors: Kazuyo Sejima, Jonas Elding
School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering
Politecnico di Milano

N 02

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School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering, Politecnico di Milano

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INUJIMA, A TEACHING METHODOLOGY

The design research developed, in recent years, by Kazuyo Sejima and by (her firm) SANAA, allows to observe the evolution of a critical thought on “how to do architecture” today, and how a specific design language has been modified according to different contexts and architectural scales. Kazuyo Sejima’s critical perspective on architecture and on the design process is captured in the spaces designed and created, which interact within the landscape and the surrounding environment, integrated with it, but maintaining an iconic image.

Kazuyo Sejima’s work is paradigmatic in many aspects, in the use of light, in the creation of spatial experience, in the careful attention to details and materials, for this reason it is particularly interesting to reflect on her way “to teach architecture” and on the continuity/discontinuity between professional practice and university.

Since 2015, Kazuyo Sejima is professor of Architectural and Urban Design at the School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, where she teaches, in the Advanced Architectural Design Studio, to students coming from different courses of the Master programs taught in the School of Architecture .

In this essay, I would like to write about the teaching activities and on the methodology developed by Sejima during her Studios. The work carried out during these years, in many lessons, reviews, and in the continuous dialogue with students and colleagues, constitutes a dense material full of open questions on the role of Architectural Design in the Schools of Architecture.

The methodology: from observation to design

Curiosity towards the project, its possible and infinite variations, represents the heart of Kazuyo Sejima’s teaching methodology. The Studio structure, organized over a single semester, provides a series of sessions, usually once a month, which are conceived as intensive workshop. Students have the opportunity to work continuously, on their projects, and to discuss them in collective reviews with professors and assistants.

The idea to create an open atelier, where students could learn observing the work of other colleagues and from the discussions with professors, was strongly desired by Sejima from the beginning of her teaching experience at Politecnico di Milano. Her teaching approach recognizes a careful ability to read the project and to understand reasons that justify and support every students’ design choices. It is a process that constantly modifies the design, questioning every decision.

Sejima explores and investigates the specificities of each individual project, does not impose a unique design methodology but, on the contrary, it is based on her way to read architecture that starts the work with students. It is in the methodological aspects that, I believe, Sejima could have played a fundamental role at Politecnico di Milano and also in the contribution to students' education. In the last few years, the School of Architecture has tried, to develop, with great commitment, the possibility to learn from different ways of dealing with design.

The School then follows the line to not provide to students conventional paths and a "single way" to make design, but to "open the field" and to train students able to choose and create an autonomous approach that will be openly affected by what they have been experienced in the university.

Therefore, the Studio conducted by Kazuyo Sejima is an experimental research, made of improvements and regressions, of a profitable reflection on the design. Architecture is the protagonist, from the early stages of the Studio, where students are asked to know and to describe the context of the future project.

During the four editions of her course, from 2015 to 2019, Sejima has decided to work on the small island of Inujima, in a quiet inland sea called Seto Naikai. It is a courageous and intriguing choice, at least, for two respects: the first is to bring students to work "outside" from known contexts or cities; the second is, however, linked to the professional relationship that connects Sejima to this island, where she has built a series of projects, of a small size, with which students are required to deal. Students are asked, in the early stages of the Studio, to know the island, its history, the role of Sejima's projects in the revitalization of this abandoned place; it is a knowledge that also takes place through Sejima's own experience and her way to read the island. Above all, it is a knowledge that comes from the "making process": for the entire duration of the Studio, the use of models, made by different materials, has been the fundamental design tool.

In the design philosophy of Kazuyo Sejima, models are the main tools to describe (and think about) the project; moreover, models have been used to understand the island of Inujima, its orography and territory.

And then the models become a possible form to describe the project: a series of study models at different scale, from the first embryonic shapes, to the definition of the interior spaces and materials. The use that Kazuyo Sejima does of models in her teaching approach opens up interesting considerations, primarily related to the clarity within which it is possible to build reasoning on the projects because the model could not deny or omit parts, but helps to understand the building, its proportions and its way of being in the environment. Through the use of models, students observe and document the evolution of their projects; they never follow a linear path but a route full of changes and contradictions that feed their work.

Sejima's teaching activity is important because it does not impose a pre-established vision, solution or design language, but critically interprets the different options proposed by students. Drawing is, also, a fundamental



instrument that accompanies the representation of projects: if the model serves to describe materiality and plasticity of forms, drawing translates it into a measured, precisely calibrated sign, to obtain certain spaces.

Sketches, drawings and models are working materials, presented and discussed at the reviews; they represent the translation of thoughts and reflections on the ongoing design research carried out by students in the Design Studio. In fact, each group has to build a program and to choose where to develop it, in the island, in this way every semester students try to rethink Inujima from different perspectives. Over the years, we have worked cyclically on similar places: quarries, industrial ruins, the old village, producing an atlas of possible design explorations.

Design Phases

The didactic structure tested in the Advanced Architectural Design Studio is an interesting approach, partially different from the usual Studios: it is organized in a series of intensive meetings, of two or three days each, and foresees a long individual work time for students. It is a formula that is well suited in courses taught by foreign professors who, therefore, need to concentrate the hours of lessons and reviews. At the same time, it is a different way and, in my opinion, a very stimulating approach "to break" the classical schemes of the usual Design Studio taught at Politecnico di Milano. In the School of Architecture, usually, a laboratory is organized over an entire semester with appointments and revisions once or twice a week; this methodology implies a continuous exchange between students and professors. The intense and frequent reviews are moments of discussion, which allow professors to deeply follow the design development with students but, at the same time, reduce students' autonomy. In this perspective, the formula tested in the course held by Kazuyo Sejima is radically different and leaves to students the opportunity to work independently for long parts of the semester.

Sejima's atelier seems much more like a design office, where it is possible to work in class, to build a critical thinking and to learn from the direct relationship with professors and other students.

The design time is, in this case, a very precious resource, and students have to learn how to manage it; during the discussions with Sejima, as well as in the individual reviews, students must learn how to communicate their ideas in a limited time, trying to describe a design vision without losing doubts and issues that they want discuss with professors.

Sejima's philosophy, and her design approach, teaches students the ability to synthesize their speech and to elaborate a clear, concise and precise vision. The sedimentation of the contents, learned during the Studio, is a fundamental step, because here could arise useful suggestions on how to continue the work.

Design Questions: how to build a critical vision

The transition from Kazuyo Sejima's poetics and design language to the pedagogical explanation of her idea on architecture is neither trivial nor immediate. The preparatory work, organized around the definition of the course schedule, focuses on methods and phases necessary to develop a project, which starts from reading the context and ends to the design of the constructive details.

Sejima's mission is to define a way to look at the design problems, following a design philosophy, which originates from her previous professional and didactic experiences.

In particular, the work on Inujima is a way to reflect and questioning the needs still present in the island and how, through the students' projects, it is possible to imagine a deeper reactivation of the entire village and, in a broader sense, of the island itself.

The dialogue that Sejima has built over the years in Inujima is based on a delicate sensitivity to the context. Thanks to Sejima's small specific architectures, almost sculptures immersed in the landscape, the island has become the center of a wider revitalization process, based on the relationship between art, nature and architecture.

In the transposition from practice to teaching, Sejima keeps strongly the idea of architectural design as a choral necessity: students' interventions become pieces of a new possible life for Inujima.

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