



ALICE

RESONANCE PLANES

EPFL SECTION D'ARCHITECTURE PREMIERE ANNEE 2023/2024 SEMESTRES 1+2

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- Y1
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RESONANCE:  
TRANSFORMING DESIGN  
PRACTICES  
EPFL-ENAC-ALICE:  
RESONANCE:  
FOUNDATIONS—PLANES—  
SHELTERS (2022-25)

We live in a time when fundamental ecosystem disturbance announces its proximity through ecological precarity: abnormal climatic occurrences, pollution, and extinction (Tsing, 2018). It is essential that architecture is able to adapt to this change, but also to recognize its complicity by questioning the foundational lessons inherited from our teachers, from history, and our practices as professionals. By questioning if these foundations are adequate. How should we learn from the incredibly rich and abundant environments built up by the many cultures of this planet, both human and nonhuman? We have a choice in how we choose to listen to the world, to understand it, to re-read it. We have a choice as to which values we are willing to replace.

The ALICE Year One (Y1) program approaches this challenge to architectural practice in two ways. The first is its processual nature. For ALICE, architecture does not belong to an abstract world conceived as a series of coherent problems, a world where architecture

would form objects to solve those pre-defined problems. Rather, architecture is always entangled in questions directly linked to our existence and therefore emergent in nature. As gestures and inventions, architecture has both cultural and technical meaning. These two aspects of architecture cannot be separated as they are of one and the same nature. The things that we invent and produce to act upon the space that we live in are extensions of our body. They are never static, but are in constant transformation, situated in relation to us as living individuals and societal beings, and in relation to the environment that is itself an evolving eco-system of other living organisms. Being alive, we—humans, plants, other species, our languages, our arts, our society—are in a perpetual state of becoming. Architecture is therefore both an expression and concretization of this aspect of becoming that we share with all life.

The second aspect that we stress in ALICE Y1 is architecture's

collective nature. Architecture is never made alone; it is a means of communicating in society and with the environment. The collective languages by which we discuss architecture plays a fundamental role in how we conceive of architecture itself and its role as an exteriorization of our bodies into the world (ref. Bernard Stiegler). Gestures—the making and the significations that emerge through making—form a cultural and technical language that we craft together. We think, speak, and make architecture together. ALICE Y1 emphasizes the collaborative nature of architecture by making projects as individuals, in pairs, as small groups, as collectives, and as one large group of people—collaborations within the ALICE team and with many public partnerships beyond the university. To emphasize the importance of the collective act, we have hypothesized, and succeeded, in thinking, designing, and building projects with 250 people, all authors and co-authors, as the culmination

of the academic year. The most important aspect in the ALICE series is however not the final form of the end-of-year construction, but rather the explorative processes of its contributors, and the capacity of an articulated *mise-en-espace* to support the search for new forms of living together: through architecture, we learn. As such, the ALICE series becomes a research agenda through which we not only build, but learn, architecture.

Lessons of collective practice require regular periods of reflection: what have we learned about architecture and our environment as we produce architectural projects? How do we integrate this knowledge—for pedagogy, for students and teachers alike—into the next cycle to constantly improve our ways of practicing? After the single-year cycles of the 'BECOMING' program, we have adjusted the program to allow for a slower, evolving, acquisition of knowledge. RESONANCE is, for the first time, a three-year ped-

agogical cycle based on the three annual stages of FOUNDATIONS (2022-23), PLANES (2023-24), and SHELTERS (2024-25). During these three years, and in partnership with *The International Museum of the Red Cross and Red Crescent*, the *Office cantonal de l'agriculture et de la nature*, *l'Office d'Urbanisme* we build on the same sites, always in dialogue with what was left there by the previous Y1 class and the Y1 class that follows. In May 2023, FOUNDATIONS were constructed that responded to the site and territory; in May 2024, PLANES will respond to these foundations taking into consideration how these FOUNDATIONS have been used by communities in Geneva. We will repair, maintain, or unbuild these FOUNDATIONS in the process. In May 2025, reflection upon how the sites have been used will result in SHELTERS that house the communal programs that have developed in response to these structures. As such, we will have had a three-year conversation with

the sites: learning with the people, animals, and plants that have already begun to adapt to those places, and with the resources in the region that were used to make these architectures.

The term RESONANCE therefore articulates a search for a more respectful relationship with our natural world, including a more thoughtful use of natural materials, of knowing where they come from and who and what was implicated in their production. It strives for a generous, and more mutually-beneficial, connection with the places where we build and more consideration for how our structures are always temporary and must return to the planet at the end of their lives. It assumes that the environment is not a neutral context that we act upon, but a living world that can also teach us about its needs if we listen carefully enough to it (ref. Robin Wall-Kimmerer). While, pedagogically, the emphasis is on the process of designing and constructing, the resulting projects also take on a life

of their own after they are complete. The projects at the sites in Geneva become places inhabited, changed, and adapted by the people who gather there. After the students and teachers leave, they become spaces re-built and un-built by many.

The terms that we have introduced to structure our first-year program are crafted around a simple idea: they are intended to first help constitute a conception of the world, to engage with it, and finally to help situate ourselves in it, both as an individual and as collectives. The first phase, TERRITORIES (MEASURES), is an examination of how correlation and infinite proportion relates our bodies to the environment and to the drawing. In BODIES (POTENTIALITIES), we conceive and project bodily acts upon the world, to test our learnings from MEASURES with our BODIES' senses and gravity. With INTERSECTIONS (TECTONICS), we begin our first collective constructions by designing and building 1:1 details

of intersections that relate to the learnings of the earlier phases: how a built detail might develop from an understanding of our bodies in space. In RESONANCE (CONSTELLATIONS), students for the first time work individually to synthesise the lessons of the first semester into an architectural proposal for one of the sites in Geneva. This phase therefore brings together a constellation of 250 individual architectural gestures—a move from territory to place. Affinities between individual projects become the catalyst from which collective projects emerge. The first phase of collective design, TIME (NEGOTIATIONS) encourages students to understand their design process as temporal—they respond to last year's projects—and temporary—likely to be altered by inhabitants and their Y1 successors. Unbuilding, maintaining, and supporting existing architectures are a part of design. The final phase, HORIZONS (PLACES), emerges as a continuation

of this process through collective building on site with our institutional and community partners.

To scaffold these ways of designing, we lean on several concepts that have been developed in collaboration with ALICE's Research and Design Research teams. The first that has emerged is that of *protostructure*, simultaneously concretized as a physical coordinate system that relates the site to the paper and a conceptual support that organizes the ideas of the larger collective. For architecture students, it makes explicit the notion of having to scale from the world to the drawing studio. *Protostructure*, for ALICE, is at times made explicit through matrices and at times manifests itself graphically—projecting the site(s) of exploration onto the tables and walls of the ateliers. A second concept to have emerged over the years is that of *protofigure*. If *protostructure* implicitly recognizes territories as the physical, political, and economic realities in which we situate

architectures, *protofigure* becomes conceptual support as we search for the affordances uncovered through acting in our environment. It recognizes that by acting, by architect-ing, we co-create places that hold significance. Materiality is emerging as another concept for the ALICE investigations, understanding our constructions as temporary manifestations of earthly materials that have been moved from, and required labor in, places beyond the site upon which we build.

Through this pedagogical approach, we hope and believe that such an architecture can shift values. Architectures are not only problem-solvers. They have the potential to relocate values—from profit in a capital fixed economy to an ecology and economy of space and of contribution. We continue to learn how to relate architectures to the ground. How to situate ideas and spatial constructs, not only in society, but also in relation to life in general, to our resources on this planet,

and very literally how to root architecture, how we let it live, how we let it become. It is in the spirit of ecological and social urgency that we propose to work on values other than efficiency, profitability, typology, or expertise. In initiating architecture as an -ing and not a thing, Architecting would be the thinking and making of space according to intrinsic principles of contributing and caring, acts that imply value, values that change, values based on both the individual and collective desire of experts and non-experts alike. We must think of new tools to unlearn and relearn architecture. Values will shift and forms may be very different. At times, these values may resurface from another moment in our pre-industrial histories. They may be values of contribution and not consumption.

It is here that such architectures may embark upon other routes. They may emerge not as rigidly ordained and easily legible objects, packaged in elo-

quent speech, or used as functional machines in view of a purpose. Spaces may rather take on a strange form and resemble organisms like whole cities, with their many imperfections and inconsistencies. They may become constructs embodying collective histories of deliberation rather than embodiments of the architectural canon. They may, at times, sound like symphonies—louder reverberations in the streets followed by quieter whispers in the night. They may be uncomfortably polyphonic (ref: Anna Tsing). Grounds, plants, structures, rhythms, details, materials may all evolve with our guidance by themselves into new forms in the interplay with many and in continual, ongoing deliberation. It is the open field of potential that draws out new collective ideas, to be brought into material life through open operations, intrinsically coordinated.

Such an architecture is again immersive. As such, it must respond to the experiential com-

prehension of the places that we live in. Such an architecture is also a political practice. The way we design space reconfigures matter, places, people, and biological life. To act upon space is a collective responsibility. We must therefore, first and foremost, question the individual values that exercise control in these actions and look for ways to allow collective values to emerge. And we must find ways to form collectives in order to find these answers.

Dieter Dietz and  
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Zurich, August 2023

