

HOUSING AS A LABORATORY OF SOCIAL DESIGN: SPATIAL APPROACHES AND NARRATIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article examines housing as a laboratory of social design in higher education, focusing on its pedagogical value within interior architecture education. Rather than approaching housing as a purely technical or typological issue, the study considers it a complex social and experiential field linked to dignity, access, care, everyday life, and the relationship between individual and community. The paper draws on theoretical content analysis of literature on housing, social design, and human-centered design, combined with teaching material from the Department of Interior Architecture of the University of West Attica, with particular emphasis on the courses Spatial Approaches and Spatial Narratives. The analysis shows that these two courses articulate complementary educational logics: the first emphasizes research, function, users, and spatial organization, while the second highlights meaning-making, narration, and the interpretive dimension of space. On this basis, the paper proposes a five-phase pedagogical model of the design process, including problem identification, interpretive research, concept formation, spatial application, and reflection with knowledge sharing. The study argues that housing can function as a productive field for socially oriented, research-informed, and critically reflective design education, while the studio may be understood as a learning community that fosters both spatial thinking and social awareness.

Keywords: *Social design, housing, interior architecture studios, pedagogical model, knowledge sharing.*

1. Introduction

Housing constitutes a complex field of architectural and social design, as it concerns not only a material shell for living but also a space in which everyday practices, social relations, memories, and forms of identity are organized. Space, therefore, cannot be regarded as a neutral background to human action, but rather as a socially and experientially constituted condition linked to the production of meaning and the lived experience of dwelling (Lefebvre, 1974; Löw, 2016; Pallasmaa, 2022). In this sense, housing is not merely an object of design, but a productive field for investigating the relationship between people, space, and social life.

The significance of housing is reinforced by its association with intimacy, protection, memory, and primary socialization, while at the same time being shaped by broader social and economic transformations (Vrichea, 2003). Urbanization, housing insecurity, the commodification of housing, and new forms of housing precarity highlight that dwelling is a social and spatial phenomenon in which functional needs, symbolic meanings, and issues of quality of life intersect (Pallasmaa, 2022). Within this context, social and human-centered design shift attention away from form as a self-sufficient construct toward design as a process of understanding complex problems, interpreting needs, and developing proposals with social awareness (Barab & Squire, 2004; Amiel & Reeves, 2008).

This issue acquires particular importance in higher education, and especially in the teaching of Interior Architecture. In the school's teaching material, design is approached as an integrated process of research, analysis, development of a central idea, and critical synthesis, with emphasis on holistic thinking, human presence, and the connection between theory and practice (Georgiadou, 2021). On this basis, the article investigates housing as a laboratory of social design in higher education and examines how the school's theoretical and teaching material makes it possible to connect social analysis, the lived experience of space, meaning-making, and design synthesis within a unified pedagogical framework. The aim is to demonstrate that housing can constitute a productive field for the development of socially oriented, research-informed, and narratively conscious design thinking (Moira & Makris, 2024).

2. Design

In the present study, design is not understood as a linear process of resolving formal issues, but as a research-based, pedagogical, and synthetic process that connects problem identification, interpretation of data, the formation of a central idea, and its transformation into a spatial proposal. This logic corresponds to design-based research approaches, in which design develops through inquiry, experimentation, feedback, and reflection, aiming not only at the production of solutions but also at the formation of design knowledge (Barab & Squire, 2004; Amiel & Reeves, 2008; van den Akker et al., 2006).

This perspective is especially important when housing is the object of design. Dwelling is not exclusively a technical or typological issue, but a field in which intimacy, memory, protection, everyday experience, and the right to a dignified life are condensed (Heidegger, 1951/2008; Pallasmaa, 2022; Vrichea, 2003). At the same time, social and economic transformations render housing a complex social and spatial phenomenon that cannot be approached as a neutral spatial product (Barkouta, 2018). Space is socially constituted, bodily experienced, and culturally meaningful, while people shape space through their practices and are simultaneously shaped within it (Urry, 2004; Löw, 2016; Lefebvre, 1974). Consequently, housing design must take into account not only functional and aesthetic parameters, but also the forms of access, privacy, coexistence, and exclusion that space produces or reproduces (Markus, 1993; Bourdieu, 1977).

Within this framework, human-centered and social design operate as key interpretive axes. Human-centered design approaches issues from the perspective of the end user, while social design shifts attention away from form toward socially responsible practice associated with quality of life, inclusion, and social change (Melioranski, 2015; Whiteley, 1993). This logic is reflected in the school's teaching framework, where studio-based courses in Interior Architecture are organized around research, analysis, concept development, and the connection between theory and practice (Georgiadou, 2021, 2022). Thus, design education is not limited to the cultivation of technical skills, but becomes a process of interpretation, documentation, and critical synthesis.

The pedagogical dimension of design is further strengthened when connected with knowledge sharing. Learning acquires substantive value when knowledge is applied in practice, reflected upon, and embedded in environments of collaboration and feedback (Ford et al., 2017; Pineda, 2010). Likewise, knowledge sharing is a collective process through which individual experience is transformed into a shared resource for learning and development (Fullan, 1991; Timperley, 2008; Wenger, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In this sense, the studio can be understood as a learning community (Stoll et al., 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

This theoretical basis takes on a more specific form through the articulation of the courses *Spatial Approaches* and *Spatial Narratives*. The former emphasizes research, theoretical analysis, and the gradual development of a proposal through successive scales, with attention to human-centered and holistic design, functionality, ergonomics, and spatial identity (Georgiadou, 2021). The latter begins from the relationship among language, text, representation, and space, where text, scenario, and diagram function as tools for transitioning from symbolic form to spatial conception (Moira & Makris, 2024). Despite their different starting points, the two courses converge around a common core: space is approached as a bearer of meaning, and concept functions as the central axis that organizes design decisions and gives coherence to the proposal (Georgiadou, 2022; Moira & Makris, 2024).

Based on the above, a five-phase pedagogical model of the design process is proposed for housing as a laboratory of social design. The phases include: problem identification and understanding; research and interpretive documentation; concept formation and meaning-making; spatial application and synthetic development; and reflection, evaluation, and knowledge sharing (Vrichea, 2003; Pallasmaa, 2022; Barab & Squire, 2004; Georgiadou, 2022; Timperley, 2008; Pineda, 2010). This schema functions as a model of learning and design process in which knowledge is identified, documented, transformed into concept, spatially applied, and ultimately reflected upon and shared within a learning community. In this way, housing may be viewed as a laboratory of social design in higher education.

3. Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this article is to investigate how housing may be approached as a field of social design and, at the same time, as a pedagogical laboratory in higher education in interior architecture. The starting point of this inquiry lies in the assumption that dwelling is not merely a technical or aesthetic object of design, but a complex social and experiential phenomenon linked to issues of access, dignity, care, everyday experience, and spatial justice (Vrichea, 2003; Pallasmaa, 2022; Barkouta, 2018).

More specifically, the article aims, first, to clarify theoretically the relationship between housing and social design by examining concepts such as inclusion, vulnerability, participation, accessibility, care, and the social impact of design (Whiteley, 1993; Irwin et al., 2015). Second, it seeks to connect this theoretical background with the school's teaching framework, and more specifically with the articulation of the courses Spatial Approaches and Spatial Narratives, so as to show that design education may be organized both as a process of solving complex spatial problems and as a process of producing meaning through narrative, representation, and spatial experience (Georgiadou, 2022; Moira & Makris, 2024).

Third, the article aims to connect the design process with knowledge sharing within an inquiry-based and collaborative educational framework. In this context, it proposes a five-phase pedagogical model of the design process and argues that the design studio may be understood as an environment of collective learning in which research, synthetic practice, feedback, and reflection form a unified pedagogical sequence (Kasimati, 2016; Trantas, 2022; Stoll et al., 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In this way, the article seeks to contribute to the discussion on the role of higher education in socially oriented spatial design and to propose an educational framework for teaching social design in interior architecture.

4. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research approach through theoretical content analysis, as it seeks to investigate concepts, thematic axes, and pedagogical implications emerging from the intersection of the literature on housing and social design with the school's teaching material. Content analysis is appropriate for the interpretation of texts as carriers of meaning, since it allows the identification of underlying values, conceptual associations, and priorities that organize a scientific or pedagogical field (Krippendorff, 2013; Mayring, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018). The study therefore aims not at the quantitative recording of frequencies, but at conceptual clarification and theoretical synthesis.

The corpus was constructed in order to cover three interrelated categories of material: theoretical and bibliographical texts concerning housing, social design, human-centered design, and the relationship between space and social life; texts from the school's educational framework, including course descriptions and teaching material related to Spatial Approaches and Spatial Narratives; and bibliographical sources related to knowledge sharing, reflection, professional learning communities, and pedagogical models (Ford et al., 2017; Pineda, 2010; Stoll et al., 2006; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 2000). The material was selected purposively, based on its relevance to the research object.

The research process developed in four stages: preliminary reading and classification of the material; development of an initial coding system; systematic coding and categorization of excerpts; and conceptual synthesis of the findings, through which the pedagogical framework and the proposed five-phase model were formulated (Mayring, 2014; Krippendorff, 2013). The units of analysis were broader meaning units—such as paragraphs, course descriptions, formulations of objectives, descriptions of processes, and theoretical positions—rather than isolated keywords. This made it possible to examine how the texts construct relationships among space, the social dimension of design, and the pedagogical process.

Five main thematic axes emerged from the analysis: housing as a social field; social and human-centered design; spatial design education and social responsibility; knowledge sharing; and the articulation of Spatial Approaches and Spatial Narratives as complementary logics of design learning. In accordance with these axes, the study explores: (a) which core concepts of social design emerge in the literature on housing; (b) how needs, dwelling conditions, and social challenges are translated into design and pedagogical criteria; (c) how the logics of Spatial Approaches and Spatial Narratives are articulated within a common educational framework; and (d) how the design process may be structured as a pedagogical model of knowledge sharing in higher education.

The validity of the study was strengthened through triangulation among theoretical sources, teaching material, and bibliography related to knowledge sharing. Although the study does not seek statistical generalization, it aims at analytical generalization, namely the formulation of a theoretically grounded framework that may be used interpretively in other cases of socially oriented design education (Cohen et al., 2018; Mayring, 2014). At the same time, the study recognizes certain limitations: it is a theoretical content analysis rather than applied field research involving students, instructors, or direct studio observation. Nevertheless, it may function as the basis for a subsequent research phase in which the proposed model will be implemented, tested, and enriched through feedback, findings, and good practices.

5. Discussion

The content analysis showed that housing can function as a particularly productive field for connecting social design with design education. This is important because it shifts housing from a narrowly

typological or functional category toward a complex social and experiential field associated with everyday life, dignity, access, and the experience of space (Vrichea, 2003; Pallasmaa, 2022). In this sense, the pedagogical value of housing extends beyond design treatment and lies in its capacity to activate social and interpretive criteria within the learning process.

At the same time, the findings showed that Spatial Approaches and Spatial Narratives do not constitute two unrelated teaching directions, but two complementary logics of design learning. The former organizes space mainly through program, users, function, and constraints, whereas the latter emphasizes meaning-making, narrative, and spatial experience through text and representation (Georgiadou, 2022; Moira & Makris, 2024). Their articulation makes it possible to understand design simultaneously as a process of problem-solving and as a process of meaning production.

This reinforces the pedagogical significance of the proposed five-phase model. The model does not function as a rigid methodological sequence, but as a schema that organizes the transition from social and spatial understanding toward research, concept formation, spatial application, and reflection. It therefore offers a coherent framework within which design learning is connected with documentation, interpretation, and critical assessment (Barab & Squire, 2004; Amiel & Reeves, 2008).

It is equally important that the proposed schema allows the studio to be understood not only as a site for the production of design solutions, but also as an environment of knowledge sharing. Through presentations, feedback, critical discussion, and reworking, individual experience is transformed into a collective learning resource, bringing design education closer to the logic of learning communities and reflective professionalism (Timperley, 2008; Wenger, 1998; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Thus, the student is educated not only in the production of forms, but also in the social, interpretive, and critical dimension of design.

The main contribution of the study, therefore, lies in proposing a way to organize housing as a laboratory of social design in higher education. This contribution is primarily theoretical and pedagogical, but it also opens the way for future empirical application and evaluation of the model in real educational contexts.

6. Conclusions

The present study highlighted housing as a complex social and pedagogical field that goes beyond the understanding of dwelling as a simple technical or aesthetic issue. The content analysis showed that housing is linked to experience, dignity, access, and the relationship with community, elements that make it a productive field of social design in higher education (Vrichea, 2003; Pallasmaa, 2022).

At the same time, the articulation of the courses Spatial Approaches and Spatial Narratives showed that design education may be organized in a way that connects the methodical resolution of complex spatial issues with the production of meaning, narrative, and spatial experience. In this context, the article proposes a five-phase pedagogical model of the design process, which functions as an interpretive and pedagogical framework for linking social analysis with design practice (Georgiadou, 2022; Moira & Makris, 2024; Barab & Squire, 2004; Amiel & Reeves, 2008).

It is also significant that the studio may be understood as an environment of knowledge sharing, where design experience is not exhausted in the final deliverable, but is transformed into a collective learning resource through documentation, discussion, feedback, and reflection. In this way, design education is not limited to the production of spatial solutions, but extends to the social, interpretive, and critical dimension of design (Wenger, 1998; Timperley, 2008; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Finally, since the study is primarily theoretical and pedagogical in character, an important direction for future research would be the pilot implementation and evaluation of the proposed model in design studios or workshop settings, in order to investigate its functionality and its contribution to the formation of socially sensitive and critically minded designers.

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