

Play-grounds as Commons: Towards a Performative Design-studio Pedagogy

This paper examines the pedagogical model developed for the first-year architecture design studio, “Playful Urbanspaces as Commons: The Faneromenis Schoolyard”, taught at the University of Cyprus Department of Architecture between 2022 and 2024. The studio pedagogy uses “play” as a critical design method to activate spatial performativity, collaborative exchange, and co-creation in reimagining spaces for co-existence, fostering interconnectedness among communities in contested urban environments.

Anthropologist Victor Turner, linked play with the concept of liminality, suggesting that both involve a suspension of normal social structures and norms. Play, like liminality, creates a space between reality and imagination where participants can temporarily escape conventional roles and expectations, allowing space for experimentation and transformation. Both in play and liminal situations, there is a sense of ambiguity and openness to new possibilities, which can lead to personal development and social change.

The studio’s brief developed as a response to the government’s decision to close down the historic Faneromeni School, founded in 1857 in Nicosia’s walled city centre, and to move the Department of Architecture of the University of Cyprus to its premises. The school’s role in the neighbourhood used to extend beyond its main use and acted as a place for the community, mainly consisting of children with immigrant biographies, who live with their families in the old city of Nicosia. These populations and their inhabited spaces are threatened by “top-down” regeneration strategies from Cyprus’s government, raising questions about the sustainable and inclusive future development of the old city of Nicosia.

The studio’s theme focuses on the schoolyard as a shared space for children and the community, fostering creative encounters, and serving as a “living laboratory” for architecture students. How can a playful urban environment mediate the creation of a common space for transcultural and transgenerational exchange open to the city? How can a living architecture laboratory become a transformative public stage for creative exchange, social interaction, and cultural production in contested urban environments? These questions are explored through the studio’s design actions and collaborative workshops, informed by its pedagogical model and performative approach.