

ALICE Atelier de la Conception de l'Espace

ALICE is a laboratory at the school of architecture (ENAC/SAR/IA) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne, Switzerland. It was founded in October 2006 and offers an experimental approach to teaching design in architecture. The team consists of a group of architects and researchers from across Europe and Switzerland. All members of the team have built up their own practices in different European Cities, including London, Berlin, Zurich, Copenhagen and Lausanne. ALICE benefits from this international background at a day-to-day level, most members commuting between those cities.

One of the key ideas underlying ALICE's approach to teaching design is a constant discourse between a conceptual framework of an architectural idea and its translation into an actual project. While projects are usually developed with typical architectural drawings and models to represent a given proposal, we are presently exploring the potential of expanding the project scale into a one-to-one condition. The intention is that the structural constraints present at this scale as well as the potential physical and spatial impact will encourage synthetic thinking and a holistic approach to design issues.

In the academic year 2007/2008 a series of explorations of gravity formed the beginning of the semester. The students first produced a physical construct declaring gravity at work. This initial artifact was then subjected to a process of analysis, re-evaluation and reinterpretation in 3-D software, physical models and architectural drawings, and was finally transformed into a proposal for a site-interactive installation or «pavilion» for the London Festival of Architecture to be held in June, 2008. At the end of the first semester, these proposals were entered in an internal, juried competition, resulting in a team of twelve students who would further develop the design and bring it to completion.

To realize a construction of a pavilion or an installation in a remote city with a second year design class is an experiment. The basic idea behind it is to

expose students to processes in architectural production, from conception, to planning, to realization, to the ultimate removal of the architectural artifact – thus, the full life cycle of an object.

At the same time, such a project calls into question the position and the viewpoint of the designer. Here, the architect is not just a creator; he is also a craftsman, a producer, an engineer, a manager, etc. Thus the designer is not only acting from without or above – from a top-view position or a bird's eye perspective, so to speak – but also from within. The employment of digital and physical tools, in combination with the actual building of a one-to-one structure, presents a framework of multiple reference frames for the maker of the design, while at the same time transgressing these frames. This altered position of the designer-architect implies understanding architectural design as an emergent process.

In the spring term 2008 the ALICE pavilion team designed Overflow as a large-scale architectonic artefact interacting with the tidal movements at the Thames River. Conceived as a flexible post-tensioned polystyrene structure, fastened along the embankment handrail as a hinge, it was reacting to the tidal amplitudes in the Thames River. Overflow was originally designed for Tower Bridge Plaza. This site was strategically chosen in order to investigate how a natural force such as the tidal movement occurring in the Thames could be amplified and extended over the land in the form of a spatial screen continuously transforming the perception of the iconic London Skyline and its presence from the plaza.

This spatial structure behaves as a tectonic overflow, from water to land. Although the Thames has largely influenced through times the development of the urban fabric of London, a personal and physical connection to the river is still restricted today by an imposing embankment. As a matter of fact this buffer zone absorbs twice a day an almost unnoticeable level change of water of over six



meters, mainly vertically along its retaining walls. The proposed installation attempts to first accentuate our awareness of this phenomenon and then transfer it into a physical experience expanding from a vertical to a horizontal spatial configuration over the embankment walkway. Overflow has been erected on the Southwark Walkway in front of Tate Modern. It has been assembled on June 18th and 19th and staged as an ephemeral event on June 20th/22nd.

The ALICE London Pavilion was awarded the prize for Signposting and won first prize as the festival's Best Overall Project by the final jury of the NASF.

In fall 2008 ALICE presented documentation and an installation on Overflow at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2008 as part of the exhibition in the Swiss Pavilion.

Team ALICE: Dietrich Dietz (director), Daniel Pokora (architect), Katia Ritz (scientific assistant), Aline Dubach (assistant), Olivier Ottevaere (assistant), Isabella Maria Pasqualini (assistant)

Pavilion Group (students)

Monica Rita Basbouss Moukarzel, Malaica Cimenti, Esteban Coto Chavarria, Nathalie Egli, Clio Gachoud, Loic Jacot-Guillarmod, Auguste Michaud, Minh-Luc Pham, Edouard Philippe, Christopher Tan, Sandro Tonietti, Andrés Tovar Nuez

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