

A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a laptop keyboard, showing keys like 'Q', 'W', 'E', 'R', 'T', 'Y', 'U', 'I', 'O', 'P', 'A', 'S', 'D', 'F', 'G', 'H', 'J', 'K', 'L', 'Z', 'X', 'C', 'V', 'B', 'N', 'M', and the spacebar. The lighting is soft, and the focus is on the central part of the keyboard.

Online Education

Teaching in a Time of Change

AMPS Proceedings Series 23.1

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AMPS PROCEEDINGS SERIES 23.1

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Online Education: Teaching in a Time of Change

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INTRODUCTION

Online Education: Teaching in a Time of Change

This proceeding publication is the outcome of the virtual conference, Online Education: Teaching in a Time of Change, held in April 2021. It was coordinated the research group AMPS, its scholarly journal ArchitectureMPS published by UCL Press together with several universities: Ball State University, USA; Beaconhouse National University, Pakistan; University of Pretoria, South Africa; University of Kassel, Germany. It offered a platform for multiple and diverse perspectives and interpretation of online education and research as it stands today.

The unprecedented changes faced by the world in 2020 produced many challenges and opportunities for the global academic fraternity. Educational systems required a sudden shift in teaching methods, communicative techniques, the use of the latest digital tools, and a quick revision of learning outcomes. On the brighter side, teachers and students proved adept at embracing innovation, and “online education” helped academicians connect across the globe; although the success of the transference to online education was not uniform, with some struggling with questions of accessibility and the ability to explore the online possibilities of this new era.

In the midst of it all, platforms like the Khan Academy and Skillshare got more attention than ever due to their effective online education structure, and disciplines whose assessment and delivery modes are heavily lecture and test-based, tended to thrive. On the contrary, those disciplines that require a physical presence due to the nature of their teaching or reliance on peer-to-peer learning, tended to suffer. Skills-based courses and exercises such as model making lost contact with the “materiality” of their subject matter. Science programs, reliant on lab experiments struggled to replace the materials or prototyping they depend on and, for the main part, the dynamic interaction of the design studio was reduced to interaction through a smartphone or computer screen. Overall, the relocation to virtual classrooms, online studios and remote seminars affected the standard work cycles of educators and researchers to such an extent that the repercussions are still to be understood. It all affects the current debate on online education.

The papers collated in this publication, and the conference which it documents, reflect the diverse perspectives of educators at this point in time. They offer a synoptic view of researchers and professionals who together are reconfiguring the possibilities of the new and emerging pedagogical realm.

Zain Adil

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A PRACTICE OF TOGETHERNESS: AN EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE LEARNING DURING THE FIRST COVID.19 LOCKDOWN

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to share the learning practice carried out in academic year 2019/2020 of the PhD in Architecture at the School of Architecture, Art and Design (EAAD) of the University of Minho, in Guimarães, Portugal. Guided by the key motto “making-with”, this cross-disciplinary program turned out to be predominantly an experience of online learning during the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. Under this totally unforeseen situation, how did we adapt the learning practice to online teaching? How did we cope with the uncertainty and the solitude of these times?

We start this paper by explaining the context of what happened. Then there follows a reflection on how we adapted to the contingency of time, and how this unfolded in three main scales of togetherness: a) the scale of the students and the PhD professor; b) the scale of the school and university; and finally, c) the scale of the planet, with international keynote speakers that otherwise would not be part of this journey.

I argue that if empathy is relevant in any practice of learning, in the online format it is critically vital. There is no “I” without the “other”, as Bakhtin¹ stated. And this becomes even truer when we are faced with solitude in the confines of our own home.

This paper is made with the contribution² of the students of this PhD edition. Talking about togetherness implies integrating the individuals that belong to this group. This collective endeavor was only possible due to their generosity and willingness to keep going despite all the difficulties we were all experiencing.

CONTEXT

The PhD Program was launched on August 2, 2020, characterized a clear interdisciplinary vocation and aiming to question and rethink architecture beyond its limits, as an exercise committed to contemporary problems. It is not enough to do “for”, it is necessary to do “with” — with people, with land and water, with the prosaic and the erudite. This implies a huge challenge for both academia and candidates who wish to be involved in this change.

The course opened with 15 applicants, with all the available seats filled, in contrast with the previous 8 editions, 5 of which did not open due to lack of minimum number of candidates. In this circumstance, the challenge I was given involved creating a course from scratch, which proved to be a

particularly demanding and passionate endeavor. In addition to defining the course strategy, it also involved defining the contents of 3 curricular units (CU), namely: Advanced Knowledge Seminar, Methodologies and Practices of Research in Architecture, and Thesis Project. We adopted a Competence-Oriented Research and Education approach, in which the student becomes co-designer of their learning process. As Sarah Shrbaji notes:

“The strategy of teaching and learning throughout the academic year has resulted in having a project thesis ready to be worked on immediately. The teaching was more focused on guiding the student to a more specific exploration about their theme (...). The teaching also focused on external inputs from architecture and other fields of study that could relate to the research theme of each student, whether from a range of bibliographical references or from the weekly seminars that included reflections and discussions about interdisciplinary subjects. The learning thus became more of a process to improve the contextualization and objectives of the research work.”³

The course’s weekly classes held on Fridays had two CU’s in the first semester: Advanced Knowledge Seminar (ACS) (2-4pm) and Methodologies and Practices of Research in Architecture (MPIA) (4pm-6pm). We began on February 14, 2020 with the inaugural session:

“I felt I was coming home, both because of the geography and the warm-heartedness generated by those who were already familiar and the new friendships that I confidently trust will be perpetuated in time. Already in the inaugural class this School positively surprised me by focussing on innovation, interdisciplinarity and humanism. There followed an intense path of knowledge, new challenges and successes, and also a lot of uncertainty...”⁴

On this day, our WhatsApp group was created following Filipa Corais’ idea. The inaugural session was followed by 3 afternoons of face-to-face classes: on February 21 and 28, and on March 6, 2020. Retrospectively, the last one already anticipated that something was about to happen. We had the privilege of having Pro-rector Professor Paulo Cruz as guest lecturer at the ACS. At the time, the professor had already been appointed president of the Commission for the Preparation and Management of the COVID-19 Contingency Plan of the University of Minho. He was a professor at our School, whom I knew well for his calmness. His nervousness in this class immediately struck me as odd, as well as his constant presence of his mobile, which he could not turn off in the scope of his responsibility regarding the pandemic. None of us knew what would ensue. The next Tuesday, March 10, 2020, the University was closed, and consequently our School.

Abruptly, we all were sent home and told that it would be for a period of 15 days if in the meantime everything returned to normalcy. It didn’t; the pandemic just got worse and we stayed at home. Within a week, we switched from face-to-face teaching to distance learning. In the case of the PhD course, we used the Zoom platform to conduct the classes. So, on March 20, a week after the closing of the campus, we resumed classes in online format — but only the Methodologies (MPIA) classes. At the time, both me and Professor João Cabeleira, the president of the Pedagogical Council, considered that the Advanced Knowledge Seminar should be suspended, since this Curricular Unit is structured with invited Professors from several disciplinary areas and is geared towards collective critical debate. We considered that the immersive experience of being in the same space at the same time was fundamental for the Seminar’s goal to be accomplished and that this would not be replicable via distance learning.

The period of 15 days passed and we did not return to school. In fact, we would only return in the 2st semester, in October 2020. We had to change our strategy and assume that we did indeed have to restart the Advanced Knowledge Seminar in online format. After reorganizing the guest lecturers’ schedule, on April 17 we resumed the weekly lectures, which ended on July 3rd.

SCALE 1 – BETWEEN THE STUDENTS AND ME

From February 20 to April 10, 4 whole afternoons, it was just us, the students and me, focused on the study, presentation and discussion of research methodologies. This immersion was important from the scientific point of view, because we had time to study the complex polyhedron of methodological approaches and, above all, the correlation between the How? (methodologies) and the What? (research theme) of each student. There we were, sharing a screen, each one of us in his own home; sometimes children passed by on the room; other times, the sound of someone in the family was heard. Private life and work blended, without frontiers or limits. Solitude; each one of us at home; some foreign students with no home environment network in Guimarães or Portugal. How to deal with all this? How to continue? How could we mitigate the suffering and uncertainty we were living? Diana Gouveia (2021) expressed that “the learning experience in the doctoral group was very enriching. Firstly because of the diversity within the group; the different backgrounds and professions turned the exchange of opinions and the mutual sharing into a constant learning process.”

Friday’s afternoons became the “Kairos moment”, when we were together, building up trust, empathy and a sense of belonging. We would discuss about scientific matters, but we would also share what we were experiencing. The class time was rarely kept; we would repeatedly have “endless” conversations about not only the academic contents, but also about everyday life — about our feelings, our fears too, about seemingly minor things. All of this turned the human side of kindness even more poignant than when we were at the school. As Ana Vilar pointed out:

“A deeply inspiring and motivating weekly moment became intrinsic to the rhythm set by our Friday classes, in an atmosphere of empathy and knowledge sharing, to which it is imperative to acknowledge the extraordinary dedication of Professor Cidália Silva with her contagious energy, tirelessness and excellence in both guiding the sessions of Methodologies and Practices of Research in Architecture and the Doctoral Program in Architecture, simultaneously with rigor and sensitivity.”⁵

Those who have done a PhD know how this path of defining an idea or a theme aiming at making an original contribution to the knowledge required at doctoral level, is a path of discovery with advances and setbacks that feed off each other. We all worked together in order to make this an easier road to take:

“Throughout this academic year it was possible to share experiences, live many others and build a journey of many desires. (...) The collaboration of all, the willingness to contribute so that the researches could develop in the best way possible, all this during a year full of uncertainties — was undoubtedly a relieved breath.”⁶

Throughout the academic year we shared the bibliographic references on the OneDrive platform. The WhatsApp group was also important in this process, for everyone shared contents, conferences, specific bibliography that might interest a fellow student, etc. Each student understood that they could do their own work and simultaneously make a contribution to the others’, , realizing that in this integral exchange all would accomplish more successful results. It is time to understand that success is collective not individual, even in the competitive environment of academia. Above all, this period allowed us to become an *esprit de corps*⁷.

SCALE 2 – BETWEEN THE *ESPRIT DE CORPS* AND THE PORTUGUESE KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

“The first year of the PhD (...) was a very intense experience and allowed a broadened perspective of both the disciplines themselves and the sense of belonging to an academic community through the relationship among fellow researchers and with professors and lecturers.”⁸

In order to meet this PHD edition's interdisciplinary goals, the Advanced Seminar Knowledge relied on the participation of renowned researchers from different disciplinary areas, both coordinators of ongoing Research Projects at Landscape, Heritage and Territory Laboratory (Lab2PT/UM) and other professors from Uminho. By exploring this synergy, PhD students had opportunities to integrate these and other projects, thus promoting research intended to be increasingly robust and collective. We brought together professors from the fields of engineering, geography, sociology of childhood, history of architecture, architecture and social participation.

After the five-week break of the Advanced Knowledge Seminar lectures, we restarted online on April 17, 2020. "The lectures offered by the doctoral program presented a high quality at the level of Professors and themes that greatly influenced the direction and methodology of the Work Plan I developed."⁹

These were open lectures, where everyone could participate. At this point, we had both Curricular Units up and running again. Week after week, on Friday afternoons we created a "new normal". The digital learning became a:

"(...) space for interaction, inherent to the group/network of work and friendship that was thus formed – between classroom, Zoom window, OneDrive platform and WhatsApp group. Despite the times of uncertainty with which this space coincided, I would highlight the sense of mutual help and togetherness among colleagues at all stages of this journey, the generosity of professors in imparting knowledge and sharing their own doctoral experiences, and the benevolence and humility of the guests during the Advanced Knowledge Seminar sessions."¹⁰

This Seminar fostered an extensive interaction via an internal and international network of exchange of knowledge. Each invited professor brought their own geographies, references and research times. In this way, they expanded the territory of our room to encompass the territory of Portugal and beyond. In each lecture, we moved between the past and the future, and for moments we had the opportunity to imagine ourselves there, in other places and times. Consequently, the *esprit de corps* had transformed itself into a larger socio-spatial network.

SCALE 3 – BETWEEN THE *ESPRIT DE CORPS* AND THE INTERNATIONAL KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

In this context, and even saddled with heavy financial constraints, we were able to recruit the participation of a series of internationally recognized lecturers (Figure 1) external to the School/University namely: Jane Rendell¹¹, with her lecture "From autopoeisis to sympoesis"; Shelley Sacks,¹² who also joined us in this lecture; and Tim Ingold¹³ with the theme "Making Growing Thinking", in which we had 75 participants from various nationalities.



Figure 1. Invited International Keynote Speakers

Bringing together these world-renowned experts, including Asiya Sadiq Polack and Christophe Polack¹⁴ to an open platform of critical discussion become a window of freedom and togetherness. In this platform, everyone interested was welcome to participate. Unexpectedly, in our virtual space we had people from the most diverse places in the world, Brazil, UK, Belgium, Pakistan, Iran, etc., and what was meant to be a closed teaching and learning experience between the students and the professor become a platform of interconnectedness between different places, cultures, lives, and experiences.

This paper argues that this experience was only possible due to the unexpected situation we were all living at that period. The invitation to the keynote speakers was done as an adaptation plan to the compulsory shift to online education. With such a short notice, we relied mostly on their generosity. Being a peripheral school of architecture, burdened by budget constraints, no longer a disadvantage. Something singular had happened here: togetherness. We all desired to connect somehow — by living in a time of physical distance, being with and for the “other” become more crucial than ever, not only for the learning practice but especially for our survival as humans.

The *esprit de corps*... And the room became our planet. And the planet became our room. On October 13, 2017 I wrote a manifesto claiming for a planetary school (Figure 2). Somehow, this PhD Course turned out to be our Planetary School.

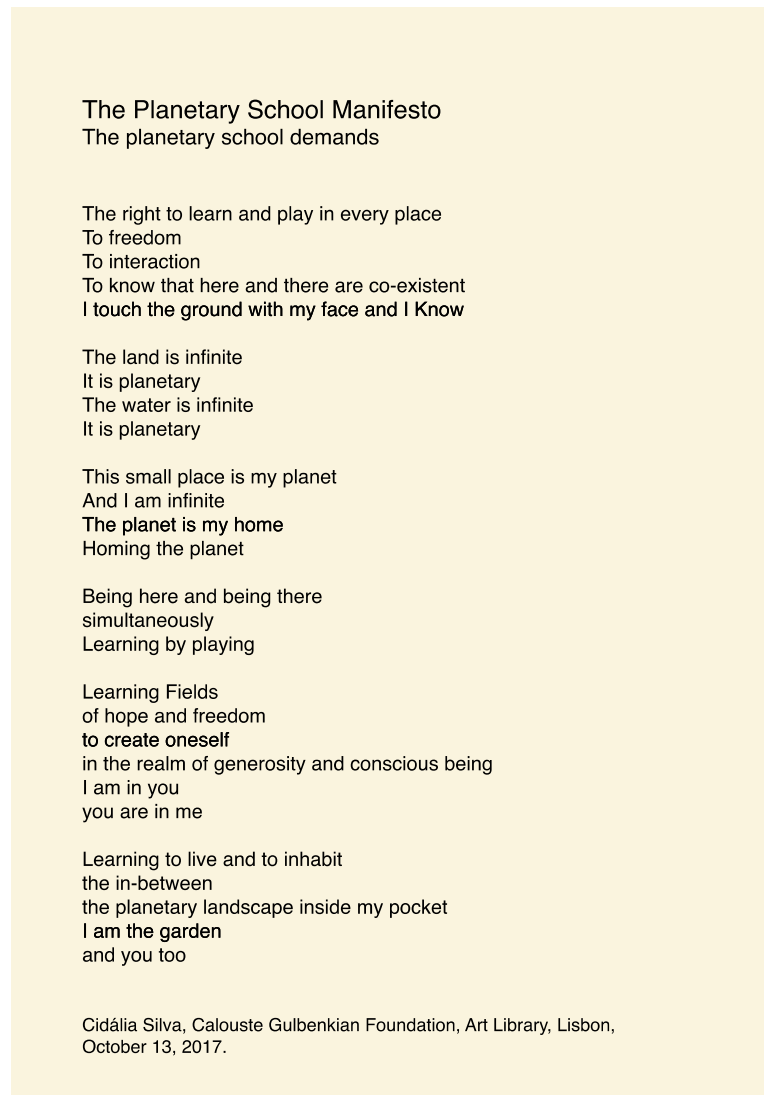


Figure 2. *The Planetary School Manifesto*, Cidália Silva, October 13, 2017.

THE SCALES OF TOGETHERNESS

In this paper we demonstrated how the practice of togetherness unfolded in three interconnected scales: the scale of the students and the professor, generating an *esprit de corps*; the scale of the school and the University became an opportunity to understand architecture in an holistic way by opening up to different, sometimes contradictory, perspectives; and, finally, the scale of the planet, by featuring professors that otherwise would not be available was an unprecedented opportunity. They brought stimulus for thinking and imagining possible scenarios for research, expanding the desire and joy for knowledge.

Finally, we need to highlight the equality of opportunities provided by online learning for students that are living abroad, or needed to move to their home country due to the pandemic, because in this format they were able to continue to attend this course. During this academic year, student Cláudia Manso got pregnant and shared some sensitive words:

“Despite all the awfulness that came with the pandemic, the adjustments to teaching in my case ended up being a tool of opportunity and equality. Shortly after I started the PHD, I found out I was

pregnant. During the pregnancy, online teaching allowed me to build a relationship with my colleagues and faculty, giving me a sense of closeness, togetherness and companionship during a time that, given the circumstances, could have been very lonely. After my son was born at the start of the second semester, online classes enabled me to continue with my studies, which gave me a feeling of normalcy at a time when everything was changing. Most importantly, it felt I had the same rights and opportunities as my fellow colleagues: my studies were not affected as I was able to attend all classes, which otherwise I wouldn't be able to do under normal circumstances, and so I didn't have to choose between my previous projects/work and my newborn baby. I was given the means to do/be both.”¹⁵

Nonetheless, we all miss being at the school, together, in presence. Although this was an incredible experience in many senses, it was also exhausting and full of up's and down's. Not all the enrolled students ended the PhD Course, mainly due to the economic crisis situation brought about by the pandemic.¹⁶ Nine students finished the academic year by publicly defending their Thesis Project and are now continuing their doctoral research in a tutorial format.

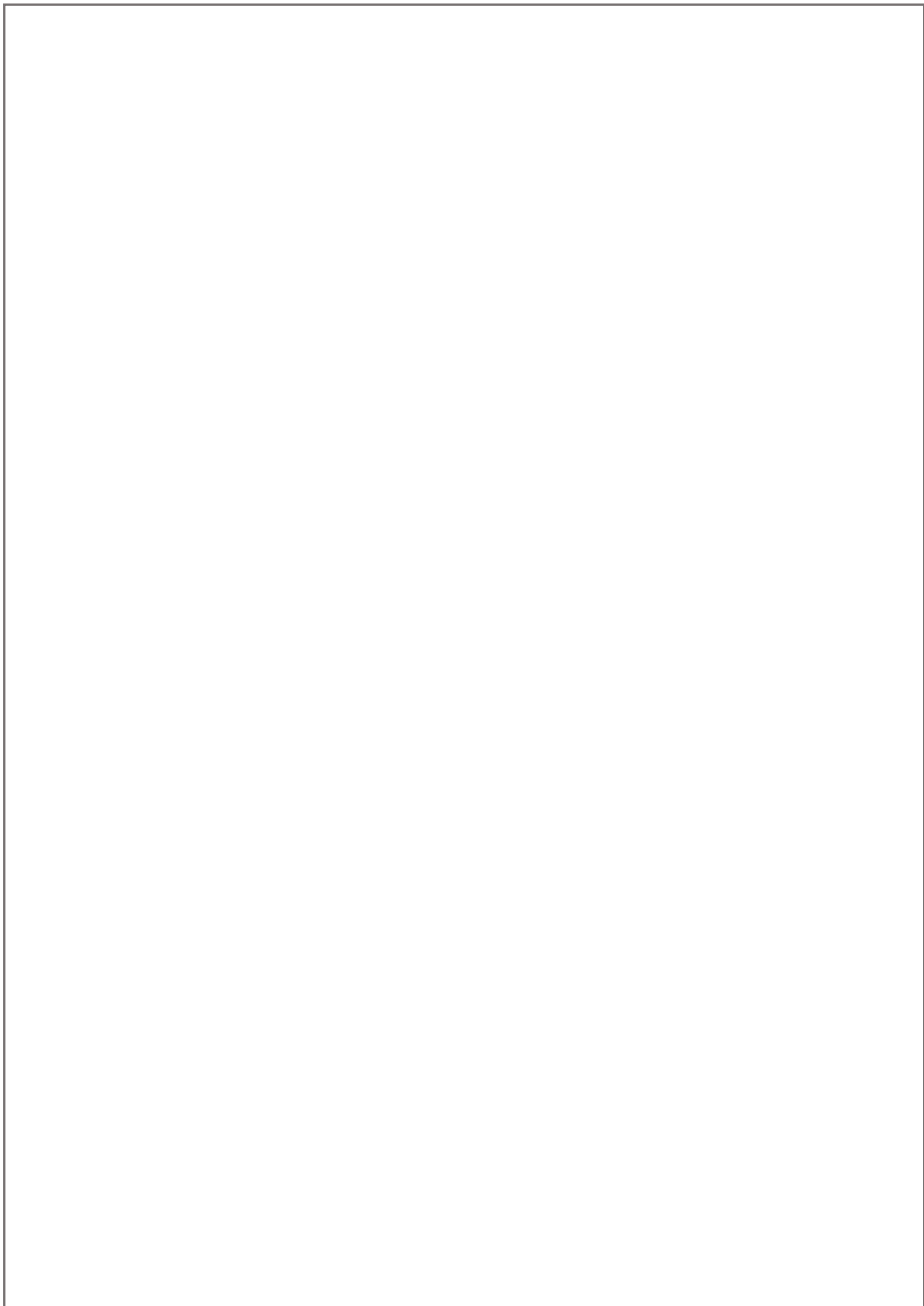
Therefore, should virtual learning replace the physical space of the school? My answer is no. But it would also be a loss to forget the opportunities offered by online learning exposed in this paper. For those that have internet service, this is a mean to access learning that otherwise would not be possible. But, in the end, we all desire physical presence and togetherness. Therefore, it is time to go back to school and integrate the opportunities brought about by the pandemic crisis.

NOTES

- ¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson, and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press Slavic Series, 1981).
- ² I asked the students to send me by email a written feedback about their experience in the doctoral course in the academic year 2019/20.
- ³ Sarah Shrbaji, email message to author, May 20, 2021.
- ⁴ Filipa Corais, email message to author, May 24, 2021.
- ⁵ Ana Vilar, email message to author, May 24, 2021.
- ⁶ Maria Rita Assunção, email message to author, May 24, 2021.
- ⁷ My gratitude to Dr. Joaquim Borges who in an inspiring conversation about this paper shared this notion of *esprit de corps*.
- ⁸ Débora Moura, email message to author, May 25, 2021
- ⁹ José Miguel Oliveira, email message to author, May 27, 2021
- ¹⁰ Ana Vilar, email message to author, May 24, 2021.
- ¹¹ Jane Rendell (BSc, DipArch, MSc, PhD) is Professor of Critical Spatial Practice at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, where she co-initiated the MA Situated Practice and supervises MA and PhD projects. Jane has introduced concepts of 'critical spatial practice' and 'site-writing' through her authored books.
- ¹² Shelley Sacks is Professor and Director of the Social Sculpture Research Unit, Subject Coordinator: Masters in Interdisciplinary Arts; Masters in Social Sculpture, School of Arts, Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment of the Oxford Brookes University.
- ¹³ Tim Ingold is Professor Emeritus of Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. His more recent work explores environmental perception and skilled practice. Ingold's interests lie on the interface between anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture.
- ¹⁴ Asiya Sadiq Polack and Christophe Polack, Partners at The Architects Polack and professors at the Faculty of Architecture – KU Leuven Belgium, have lived and worked together in Karachi and Brussels since 2000, merging their diverse expertise into a socially responsive spatial practice.
- ¹⁵ Cláudia Manso, email message to author, May 25, 2021.
- ¹⁶ For any of you reading this paper, remember: failure and success are dialogic, as Edgar Morin taught us in one of the principles of Complex Thought. See Edgar Morin, *Introduction à la pensée complexe* (Nanterre: ESF éditeur, 1990)

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