THE PERIPHERY OF THE PERIPHERY
POST-OCCUPATION OF THE RURAL CITY

SYLLABUS

THE PERIPHERY OF THE PERIPHERY is a research project that aims to explore the techniques – models and methods – for re-thinking and re-designing the re-occupation and re-equipping of the smaller rural nuclei. The programme enquires about the future of the area between cities when the exodus to the city condemns large cities to a picturesque image and a fixed use driven by the fascination with and a nostalgia for the ‘authenticity’ that has been left behind. From this point of view, the rural as a counterpoint to the urban implies an attitude of paternalism with a hidden aspect in the transformation of villages into service centres for sporadic urbanite visitors avoiding other more contemporary forms of progress. This situation of dependency calls for a new sensitivity that involves the revision of the models of prosperity to redefine what we understand as quality of life. Architecture has a lot to say about this process of re-occupation raising questions about the capacity of these enclaves, the relevant constructive techniques, the revision of the existing and new types, the incorporation of environmental sensitivity and the social, cultural and economic etc. equations. Through this perspective ‘the periphery of the periphery’ will explore future opportunities for the anthropological heritage, the landscape and its inhabitants.

SUBJECT MATTER

The inexorable growth expected in the population of cities seems to assume that the mass displacement of rural inhabitants towards urban centres is a natural phenomenon attested to by their opportunities, knowledge and quality of life. Apparently, no-one today questions how to make life away from the city into a vital experience equally shared between rural and urban culture. Large-scale agriculture, tourist exploitation of nature and the installation of wind-farms, dams and large factories give off an image of a zone that is de-populated and functions as a form of rear-guard, ecological footprint or pantry for the city, a no-mans’ land covered by infrastructure. However, in recent years the awakening of an environmental awareness, appreciation of anthropological and natural phenomena and the need to invent ways of inhabiting the countryside have demanded the attention of a range of disciplines. A variety of proposals – from the metabolistic mega-structures of the 1960s to the major suburban residential developments of the turn of the century – has come to fill up this area with
tranquilising names but that were never resolved with clarity since they meet the image of the great fantasy of the grand, ex-novo unitary project without understanding that today the highly complex projects involving the implication of many agents are resolved using strategies and operating systems where hybridisation, sustainability or indeterminacy are the substitute for the mono-functional, transposition of models and specificity.

The economic boom periods are associated with improvements to services in the city and the quality of life for its inhabitants, something that is systematically accompanied by a politically-correct reading of the trans-peripheral context left behind: that which sentimentally takes care of the rural context in search of certain forms of simplicity and authenticity. With the appearance of new economic activities that are fundamentally based on tourism and the phenomenon of the holiday- or second-home, a relation of dependency on the city is encouraged but which has limited and unbalanced the development of these nuclei towards the sector of provision of services to outsiders. As a result, while every small village in Europe seeks to find a competitive edge to its ‘rural’ hotel experience, its local festivities or natural or gastronomic resources, it is unable to provide its own inhabitants with the most elementary facilities due to its small size and restricted clientele.

Our criticism is that the rural structure based on very small-sized and closely spaced nuclei leads to a broader and more imaginative reading that seeks greater autonomy from rather than dependency on the metropolis, better future prospects for youth, greater diversity of residents and a reduced polarity between the inhabitant and the visitor.

**TASK AND PROCEDURE**

To the north of the province of Madrid, after passing through the area under the influence of the industrial belt that surrounds the capital, it is possible to identify a large zone that extends into the provinces of Ávila and Guadalajara where there isn’t a single municipality with more than 500 inhabitants, where groups of three students will select three municipalities for the drafting of a joint strategic plan that will lead to the optimisation of resources while providing opportunities for progress to their inhabitants. The task will culminate in the designing of unique facilities that is the result of individual work, that of pairs or of trios of students following the guidelines from a shared and integrated project.

The course will begin with an exploratory investigation on the urban nuclei selected and will include themed maps and a series of data with which the Integrated Plan is to be elaborated proposing a schedule, organisation, economy (production and consumption), an image, a projection over time (obsolescence and flexibility). By mid-term the three chapters of the Plan to be developed in the second half of the course should be outlined.

The study-trip will be to Madrid and its surrounding area and will include visits to the historic and contemporary architecture of the city and the work area: meetings with students and staff (review) from the Madrid school that is working on the same project; visits to emerging studies that have worked in the rural field; and meetings with local politicians on the matter.
THE ROLE OF ARCHITECTURE

If we make the effort to recall activities on a particular scale that have taken place on the trans-peripheral scene then isolated operations with a major impact come to mind, separated from the inhabited nuclei, lying alongside major roads and designed without any character and with clear apathy.

If we imagine a new generation of Clean Industry Garden Centres with little impact, Research Centres, Pedagogical Institutions… or any project to provide facilities to these villages that are in search of a redefinition of their character then we can see that they will have to face up to the small scale of these rural centres or their delicate mountain landscapes and agriculture. We also are aware that if the actions are of a certain size, their capacity to transform and improve present conditions is a double-edged sword that is able to convert municipalities into theme parks or sterile areas in the shadow of a facility that will mark out their future life.

In order to face up to these contradictions we would like to explore the possibilities of the architectural project as an instrument for the reading, interpretation and description of the conditions for the zone, setting out strategies for the extension of the daily radius of action for the inhabitants of these new communities; we need to understand what already exists – nature and developed areas – as a useful support on which to set out recycling programmes in the literal sense of the word; we aim to build a new ´rural city´ that makes use of the independence of the site inhabited regarding homogeneous access to information and culture.
Some data can be established for a starting point: filling up the programme exclusively with a focus on visitors or weekenders, while extending it to other complementary uses up to the limit of the capacity of the site and its surrounding area; developing it from the point of view of an authentic environmental requirement; introducing an increase in the natural content far beyond the obvious; working on the hybridisation of collective and individual, productive and residential programmes while exploring new forms of work, leisure and socialising.

We are not interested in the architecture of isolated buildings but rather that which aims for the hybridisation of what exists with what is new to generate a new reality where sophisticated and elementary technologies of density, soaking up, community and individuality co-exist. The concepts associated with the prepositions (before, under, with, between, without, on top…) will lead to architectural occupation, superimposition, infiltration, delimitation, etc. operations.

The production of graphic materials, models or audio-visual presentations will be an essential part of the task. The selection and/or design of the instruments and the methods of representation are a project in themselves and therefore are the object of reflection on and criticism of their fitting with the concerns and objectives of the project. In this sense, stress will be placed on the communicative capacity of portfolios with documents for the transmission to third parties of the relevance of the project.