

# THE EMERGENT STUDIO: A Paradigm of Transcultural Design and Research

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## Genesis:

The Genesis of this Paper lies within the establishment of the postgraduate Emergent Studio in 2007 at the University of Portsmouth School of Architecture (UoPSoA). The nomenclature of the studio was drawn from the writings of Fritjof Capra<sup>1</sup> who identified two models of human organization:

*"Human organizations always contain both designed and emergent structures.....Designed structures provide stability.....Emergent structures, on the other hand, provide novelty, creativity and flexibility. They are capable of changing and evolving."<sup>ii</sup>*

The objective was to develop a studio ethos that is predicated upon an outward facing attitude that engages with the dynamic shifts of our contemporary world, viewed through the lens of architectural endeavor. From the outset, the Studio has been rooted within a phenomenological frame of academic praxis: using this theoretical platform to interrogate architecture across cultural, climatic and social contexts. We term such an approach *Transcultural Design*. In addition, we use a paradigmatic methodology to conduct such investigations, this method, by definition liberating the Studio from occupying a singular theoretical position.

In the five years since establishment the Studio has initiated and maintained an intense and enduring relationship with colleagues from the University of Aalborg (Denmark), Department of Architecture, Design and Mediatechnology (UoADoADM). This collaboration has developed from initial staff teaching exchanges funded through the ERASMUS programme, to an expansive collaboration that includes, joint design projects, student exchange, staff exchange and an expanding collaborative research agenda.

This Paper will, through exemplars of student output, explore the value of a transcultural paradigm of architectural education. The academic collaboration between the two institutions serendipitously gave rise to a third collaboration with l'Ecole Nationale d'Architecture (ENA) of Rabat, Morocco. ENA is the only publically funded School of Architecture in Morocco and had established links with UoADoADM. This relationship was nurtured over time and ENA provided an additional context in which the Emergent Studio interrogated theoretical and design ideas. This facilitated a comparative frame of reference of 'North and South': the Nordic and the North African that has been consistently employed by the Emergent studio over the past four years.

## Pedagogic Frames:

The Universities of Portsmouth, Aalborg and ENA have significant differences in pedagogy. Portsmouth School of Architecture sits within the Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries, and encourages a strong conceptual base for design, engaged with physical and cultural contexts and has a paradigmatic methodology embedded within teaching and learning praxis. In contrast, the University of Aalborg has a clear problem-based learning (PBL) ethos, that within the Department of Architecture, Design and Mediatechnology, is manifested through self-selecting group working, clearly defined project programmes led by engagement with the Nordic (humane modernist) context that it sits within, fused with consequential tectonic frames of reference. It should also be noted that UoADoADM sits within the Faculty of Engineering and Science and programme content is reflective of that technical influence. ENA was established in 1980 and is a public HE institution under the governance of the Ministry of Housing, Urbanism and Territorial Development. The School has a diverse range of international collaborators and a correspondingly diverse range of learning, teaching and research interests from interrogation of vernacular settlements and architecture to computational modeling.

The UoPSoA paradigmatic framework facilitates the interrogation of architecture through the intelligent and methodical examination of the work and influences of a diverse range of architects: contemporary and historic, European/non-European, male/female, context-specific/decontextualized, theoretical and pragmatic. This paradigmatic approach facilitates an understanding of 'the manner of' particular practice and influence, liberating the analysis from an often over-simplistic singular theoretical positioning.

In contrast, Aalborg's PBL ethos lends itself to collaborative approaches through group working. Students use this collaborative method with considerable maturity, particularly within the group self-selection process that is not, as one might expect, driven by personal relationships, but rather is informed by a clear ambition to form groups that comprise complimentary skill sets and attitudes. These collaborative groupings require by definition, organizational frames, and again the Aalborg students exhibit considerable levels of maturity in the management of the day-to-day activity of the groups, in organizing spaces to work, deadline setting, distribution and delivery of tasks and presentations. Another significant pedagogic difference between the two institutions is that UoADoADM teaches within a large year cohort (70+) broken into groups of between 5 and 7 students. The staff team thus teaches across a range of studios within the year. UoPSoA teach within year-long studio of between 5 and 15 students with two/three (2 FTE) <sup>iii</sup> dedicated members of staff allocated to each studio.

ENA engage with the rich cultural and physical heritage that Morocco provides and international collaborations bring an external perspective to the School. This is further informed by diverse research activity that clearly informs pedagogy at the levels of both curriculum design and content. The diverse pedagogies of the three institutions provide dynamic collaborative potentials.

### 3.0. TRANSCULTURAL DESIGN:

Since inception, the Emergent Studio has consistently focused upon the opportunities held by cultural transgressions: in particular, the potential held for core phenomenological ideas to traverse cultural boundaries. Given the Studio concentration upon the philosophical realm of phenomenology, our central theoretical focus has been upon the writings and works of those architects that may be judged to fall within the construct of phenomenology that are clustered in what we might term the Nordic World. Norberg-Schultz, Rasmussen, Aalto, Utzon, Fehn and more currently Pallasmaa represent this trend that drew originally from the Nordic humane modernism tendency of the mid twentieth century. Clearly, given such a concentration of this pattern of thought, it was inevitable that our theoretical and later physical emphasis, should at least in part, fall in the Nordic World.

Aalborg, the City in which Jørn Utzon spent his formative years, is home to the Utzon Research Center and it's physical manifestation, the Utzon Center, a building on the Fjord waterfront designed by Jørn Utzon and his son Kim. The Utzon Research Center is an initiative of UoADoADM and

led by Adrian Carter, a UoPSoA alumnus. The Utzon dimension of the collaboration provided yet another paradigmatic lens through which to view the realm of Nordic phenomenology, as Utzon himself never ascribed to a singular theoretical position but rather drew from a diverse range of influences. Interrogation of this Nordic phenomenological tendency illuminated a consistent connection to North Africa, particularly Morocco. Sverre Fehn, Jørn Utzon and Juhani Pallasmaa (amongst others) travelled to and have drawn influence from the archaic vernacular architecture still evident in Morocco.

*'I went to Morocco not to discover new things but to recollect what had been forgotten. And when you enter a valley at sunset and hear a man call from the highest rooftop, you think still: I don't know anything about this. The only answer to this architectural simplicity and clarity is that it exists in a culture that for us seems timeless. Architecture's work is perfect, because it is working in a timeless space. Its signature is anonymous, because it is nature itself.'*<sup>iv</sup>

The influence of his 1949 hike through the High Atlas Mountains resonates in Utzon's work. The built relationship to landscape, the morphology of the vernacular villages, houses and courtyards and the significance of the wall as threshold, are clear references that informed the design of the Kingo and Fredensborg Housing Projects. At a more subtle level, we can better understand Utzon's layering of space, engagement with the idea of threshold and his tectonic rigor in the context of the reinterpretations of his experience of Morocco. In this sense, as Fehn once remarked:

*'Utzon was global. He lived on the earth and had a book from each continent, at the same time he searched for inspiration in everything.'*<sup>v</sup>

These reinterpretations were not simply reinterpretations of form, but were deeper and more significant reinterpretations of the core ideas of architecture: what we might term archaic ideas. It was clear from the interrogation of Utzon's travels and the impact upon his canon of work that there was something significant upon this 'drawing from' cultural contexts that were not his own. In all of these contexts whether Mexico, China, Japan, America or indeed Morocco, it is clear that Utzon drew something that we might describe as 'of the origin'. These transcultural design influences provided the Emergent Studio an academic framework to work within, our emerging collaborations with Aalborg and ENA provided our locations and contexts.

#### Collaborative Content:

The Emergent Studio has set a consistent overarching theme of 'North and South'. Our objectives were:

- To inculcate (essentially Nordic) phenomenological theory within the Studio ethos to provide students with a lens through which architecture could be studied.
- To provide immersion within two distinct cultural and physical contexts as a vehicle for testing theoretical positions.
- To engage with collaborative projects that drew from diverse institutional pedagogies.

Students elect to enter studios at the end of Semester 2 of MArch Year I. Those who have chosen to study within the Emergent Studio are encouraged to read in advance of joining, theoretical writings and study the design work of a range of architects and theoreticians engaged within what we might term the 'Nordic phenomenological project'. This study, with subsequent Seminar sessions provides a theoretical underpinning for the next phase of the project.

Early in Semester Three we embark upon a Nordic Field trip in order that the students can, over a relatively short period of time, immerse themselves within the *actual* context that their theoretical studies have drawn upon and thus contextualize that body of knowledge. These field trips have taken a number of forms but have been consistently collaborations with UoADoADM. We have undertaken joint field study trips in Denmark, Finland and most recently Norway. In 2009, our field study was focused upon Aalborg. In each case the Emergent Studio adopts the design project set for the Aalborg Students as a vehicle for engaging with the particularity of place. Project vehicles have been diverse: a 'Living Bridge' that traversed the Limfjord that Aalborg borders, A Church competition Project located in Ørestad, Copenhagen and this year the studio has adopted a theme of 'Edges of Time – Spaces of Spirit' tested initially through another Church Competition Project, this time in Alesund, Norway. We have employed a number of different models to develop collaboration between students from Portsmouth and Aalborg, ranging from short intensive joint esquisse projects where Portsmouth students are distributed across the Aalborg student groups, to joint seminar sessions and design charrettes. Each of these vehicles have value but upon reflection after five years, we sense that the joint esquisse projects hold the greatest value for students immersing them, albeit briefly, in each other's pedagogies and design approaches.

Upon completion of the field study, students return to Portsmouth. Again, we have employed several vehicles across five years, in order to reinforce their Nordic learning experience upon returning to their own cultural context, ranging from the continuation of the design project set in Aalborg, to the reinterpretation of that project with a Portsmouth-based physical context. Again, upon mature reflection, perhaps the greatest value to students is provided by the continuance of the Nordic project. At the end of semester three, a formal design review is held through which the Nordic Project is assessed. We invite colleagues from UoADoADM to join this process and in the present academic year a complimentary invitation has been extended to us to join the parallel review in Aalborg. This collaboration has been formalized by both institutions in offering tenure for Adrian Carter at the University of Portsmouth as a visiting Research Fellow, reciprocated by the University of Aalborg appointing Roger Tyrrell as an Adjunct Associate Professor. This tenure has concretized institutional relationships and facilitated inter-institutional structured teaching inputs both in Aalborg and Portsmouth. As semester three closes, the Emergent Studio is introduced to the second project located in the 'South' – Morocco. Over the Christmas vacation, students are encouraged to immerse themselves in appropriate literature, film and music in order to begin to understand the cultural shift they are about to embark upon. The studio then immediately travels to Morocco for a second level of immersion and our collaboration with ENA commences.

This collaboration with ENA is different to that with Aalborg, in that it is less formalized and less consistent in the opportunity for students from Portsmouth to engage with those from Morocco. We base ourselves in accommodation owned by ENA in Marrakech, the City becomes the initial focus of our immersion. We hold a very short esquisse project in Marrakech prior to moving South to the High Atlas Mountains to explore the forms of Moroccan vernacular architecture of the hill villages both on the South and North sides of the mountains. Here students reveal to themselves the archaic dimensions of architecture that they first encountered in the writings of Fehn and Utzon. We have developed a diverse range of project vehicles from a 'Center for the Encouragement of Phenomenological Thoughts and Acts' to 'Refugium – a Place of Retreat'. These projects are located upon specific sites in the valleys of the High Atlas Mountains. In the current academic year, our site is the hill village of Ait Benhaddou, located in the South Atlas: our project vehicle is 'Bridging Tensions'. Our most successful point of collaboration with ENA was our first, in 2009, when students from both institutions worked, again albeit briefly, upon a joint project. The benefit to both sets of students was clear in the exchange of ideas

and methodologies and in the case of Portsmouth students, a deeper sense of context was gained, informed by the generosity of the ENA students. Upon completion of the field study in Morocco, we return to Portsmouth and Emergent Studio students must choose, either to extend their Nordic project into Semester Four or to re-focus their Nordic learning into the Moroccan context. It is of interest to note that the majority of students, prior to visiting Morocco, articulate a wish to continue the Nordic project. Upon returning from Morocco, without exception, all students have elected to pursue the Moroccan project. Such perhaps is the power of the archaic.

The scope of collaboration with both UoADoADM and ENA has expanded beyond the origins of staff teaching exchange funded through the ERASMUS programme and brief learning exchanges by student groups. We have witnessed a growth of Semester-long student exchange from Aalborg and ENA to Portsmouth, again, in the case of Aalborg students, funded through the ERASMUS programme; these exchanges significantly enrich the learning atmosphere at UoPSoA. However, the most significant growth area within both collaborations has been and continues to be in the area of Research. Early conversations with the University of Aalborg illuminated the conjunction of two complimentary areas of research interest. The Utzon Research Center in Aalborg had a developing heritage and authority in the examination of Utzon's methodology and the University of Portsmouth had a focus upon paradigmatic methodologies in the exploration of architectural ideas. In this conjunction we jointly posited the potential of exploring Utzon through a paradigmatic methodology.

On this basis the Jørn Utzon Research Network (JURN) [www.utzonresearchnetwork.org](http://www.utzonresearchnetwork.org) was established to develop academic research into Utzon's canon of work and academic discourse as to the relevance of Utzon's methodologies in contemporary architecture through the framework of paradigmatic investigation. The outcome has been the development of an international network of academics, students and practitioners numbering some 200 individuals, the identification of institutional members that include UoPSoA, UoADoADM, ENA, the University of New South Wales, Australia (UNSW), and the University of Newcastle, Australia (UoN). The Third<sup>vi</sup> International Utzon Symposium was held in Marrakech, Morocco in collaboration with ENA with an associated Workshop over Easter 2012, both events being led by Juhani Pallasmaa, Jan Utzon (Jørn Utzon's son) and Richard Leplastrier, an Australian Architect of repute who worked with Utzon on the Sydney Opera House and other projects. Symposium proceedings are about to be published, and a diverse range of associated

publications is currently being developed. The Fourth Symposium and associated Workshops are scheduled for Sydney in February 2014. In the context of the original ambitions of the collaboration, this research dimension was unexpected, but is illustrative of the multi-dimensional potentials held by such collaborative initiatives.

### Exemplars and Outcomes:

We will discuss these collaborations through the exemplars of student work, in order to articulate both the content and textual qualities of these transcultural collaborations. We have identified particular student projects as they best exemplify the value and the challenges of this approach to architectural education.

#### The Living Bridge Project – Aalborg, Denmark. (2009-2010):

Students: Jonathan Abdenbengro, Jamie Crorkin, Ricky Evans, Kanav Gupta, Robert Kahn, Khalid Saleh, Phillip Satchell, Daniel Terry.  
Staff: (UoPSoA) Roger Tyrrell, Nicola Crowson, Dr. Richard Bunt, Professor Geoffrey Broadbent.  
(UoADoADM) Adrian Carter, Lars Botin.

This project was authored by UoADoADM and presented to both cohorts of students in October 2009. The project was introduced by Adrian Carter (UoADoADM) in a lecture that explored the heritage of the living bridge typology through a series of historic and contemporary references and went on to discuss form, site and tectonics. In counterpoint, Roger Tyrrell gave a subsequent lecture exploring the concept of bridging, drawing heavily upon Heideggerian thought, exploring the context of the project and encouraging engagement with the *act* of bridging (the verb), ahead of the *object* of the bridge (the noun). Do we need to bridge the Fjord? If so where? If so how? At one level the consequences of conjoining two pedagogies was exposed. The UoADoADM students engaged with the idea of 'bridge', the UoPSoA focused upon the conceptualization of the act of 'bridging'. At another level however conjunctions emerged between the two positions: The idea of 'bridge' demands a concept upon which it is predicated. The concept of bridging has tangible and thus tectonic consequences. Despite these issues being exposed within the project introduction, the response from the Aalborg students was fascinating. Without exception, they moved into their groups and proceeded to engage with matters of rigorous group organization and management, such as programming group activity and identifying key dates. Only once these issues had been resolved, did they then engage with the content of the project and for the vast majority of students: that meant designing a bridge. In contrast, the UoPSoA students who were by now distributed across the Aalborg groups sought to encourage a broader discussion regarding the acts of bridging. Such encouragement had a mixed

reception perhaps characterized by a sense that generally the students of Aalborg were output focused, those from Portsmouth perhaps more content and process focused. Over the next few days of joint activity, these tendencies were variously reinforced or in some cases undermined. Intensive design exercises were injected that in some ways questioned the response of the Aalborg students to react and conversely, the response of the Portsmouth students to conceptualize. It was also clear that the PBL pedagogy of Aalborg had the consequence of producing very effective and productive working methods. Almost immediately students were drawing with intensity, making countless speculative models, analyzing site and context. Upon returning to Portsmouth to continue the living bridge project several important transformations had occurred:

- Students had become aware of, and open to the value of working in groups (which UoPSoA students have tended to consistently previously resist)
- A clear positioning had evolved between those students who chose to bridge the Fjord metaphorically and those who chose to bridge literally
- Lines of student communication had been instigated between students in Portsmouth and Aalborg through email, SKYPE, text and social media that facilitated effective on-going conversations at distance

Evans (Figure 1) and Saleh (Figure 2) had each decided upon a metaphorical approach to the project, designing subtle interventions that celebrated archaic elements of human existence such as the desire to dwell and gather and the rituals of death.



Figure 1

The Hearth and the Horizon aalborg

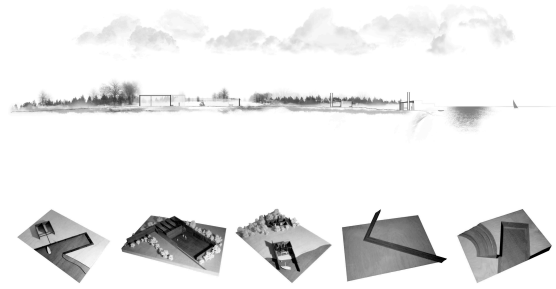


Figure 2

In contrast, Sage (Figure 3) and Crorkin (Figure 4) had developed proposals that tangibly bridged the Fjord that sought to respond to the Aalborg programme in a poetic, lyrical and tangible manner. For us, this dichotomy of approach was fascinating, and engendered many dimensional conversations in studio sessions discussing these two distinct approaches.

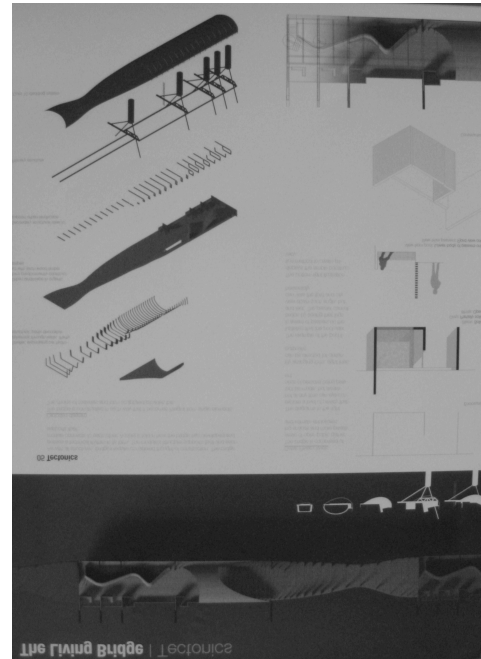


Figure 3

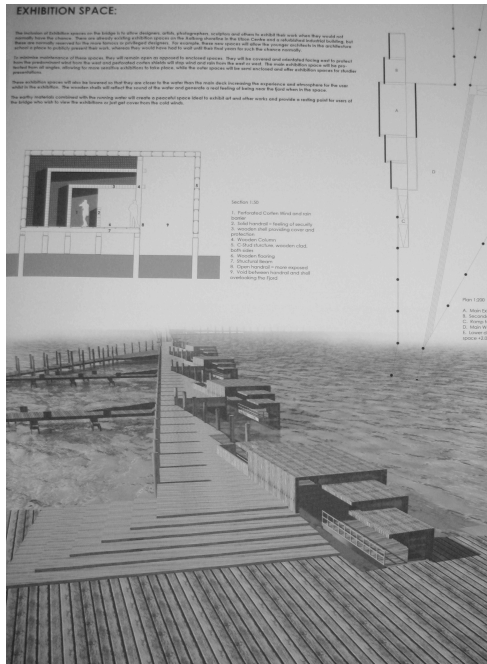


Figure 4

#### Utzon Academy Morocco. (2011-2012):

Students: Ewan Gibson, Luke Sutton, Melissa Royle, Simon Batchelder, Chris Ryder, Shean Tan Wei, Leanne Tod, Jonas Vistasen (Semester1), Line Nørskov Eriksen (Honorary Studio Member)  
 Staff: (UoPSoA) Roger Tyrrell, Nicola Crowson, Professor Geoffrey Broadbent, Greg Bailey, Nick Hebden.  
 (UoADoADM) Adrian Carter, Lars Botin.

Members of this cohort had also had the benefit of working on the Aalborg Living Bridge Project in semester three and, as with the cohort discussed above, had enjoyed a transformative experience with their colleagues from Aalborg. What is of particular note with this cohort was the immediacy of their appreciation of the value of collaboration with others, and how four of them quickly defined themselves as two groups of two. It should also be noted that Vistasen, a student from UoADoADM had joined the studio on ERASMUS exchange in semester one and also that one UoPSoA student Royale, had developed a close friendship with Nørskov Eriksen from UoADoADM, and had they had consistently communicated design ideas as their individual projects developed in the previous semester. The project in Morocco was located in the Ourika Valley, on the Northern face of the Atlas Mountains. The brief was generic: 'The Upton Academy' and purposely designed to allow students sufficient space to 'build the brief' drawing upon their experience both in Morocco and Denmark. We will focus upon the work of the four students who worked collaborative in groups of two. Sutton and Gibson had complementary approaches that fused ideas of archæ and technæ in a collaborative endeavor, exploring the potential of this project in the fusion of ideas, making and representation (Figure 5). Royale and Batchelder

developed a project response that was driven by ideas of a response to the temporal dimensions of architecture through journey (Figure 6).

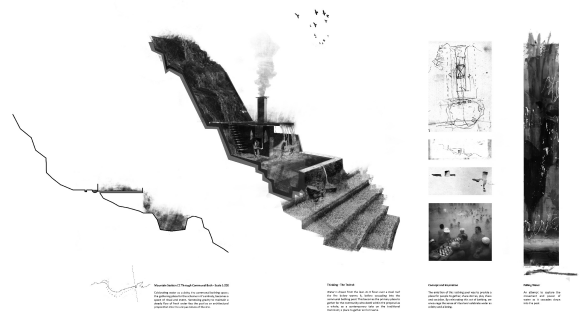


Figure 5

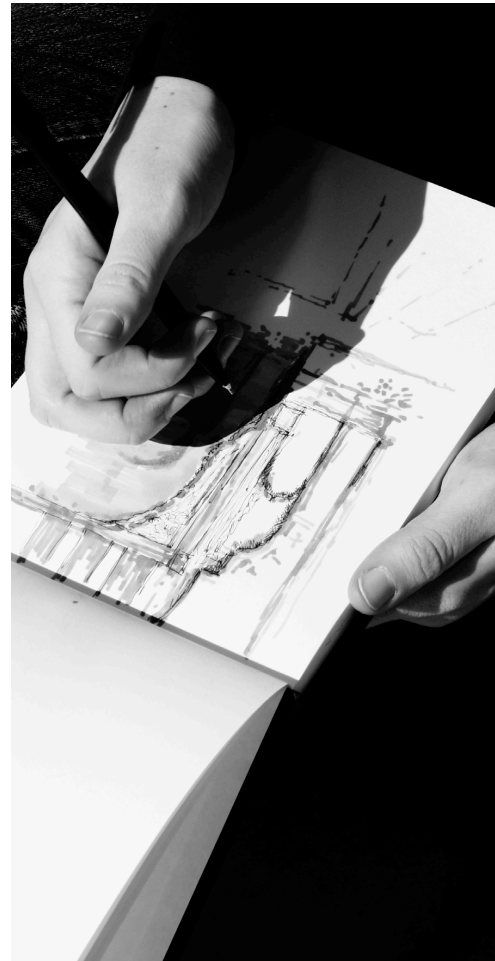


Figure 6

It is clear that the experience of Denmark combined with that of Morocco produced a depth of engagement that reflected the archaic nature of the brief and the site. Of equal interest however are the social dimensions of these collaborations

across cultural boundaries. Friendships have developed that may well endure, founded as they are upon shared experiences and personal and collective transformations.

#### Conclusions:

In many senses, these collaborations were experiments and many of the outcomes were incapable of prediction at the outset. In the realm of teaching and learning, perhaps the most significant outcome was the manner in which three diverse pedagogic models 'infected' each other and how that infection impacted upon both staff and students alike. It is clear upon reflection how our teaching within the Emergent studio has shifted as a response to these influences. Interrogation of the reaction of students from Aalborg would suggest an evolving thirst to engage with the conceptual, poetic and phenomenological dimensions of architecture. It is also evident that the cultural contexts we were variously exposed to had a transformational impact upon the learning experience of students and staff alike. These experiences have in turn illuminated our collective social consciousness when exposed to, (for example), the extent and dimension of poverty in Morocco. In addition, the focus of learning within the Emergent studio continues to shift and adjust as a direct consequence of these transcultural experiences. Our studio direction continues to 'emerge' as we engage in a more focused way, (for example), in the archaic realms of architecture. At a more tangible level, students from the Emergent studio have clearly been infected with enhanced organisational skills learnt in Aalborg and are much more open and appreciative of the value of collaborative working. The concretization of the collaboration between Portsmouth and Aalborg in providing complimentary staff tenure has facilitated structured teaching inputs to be delivered through reciprocal events, encouraging externality and academic currency. These injections promote a freshness and vibrancy and gently challenge academic preconceptions. Of greatest surprise however, is the extension of our learning and teaching collaboration into the field of academic research. There is something beneficial in the simple circumstances of academics from different institutions being in close proximity to each other, allowing synergies to emerge. The rapidity with which the JURN project has developed would not have been possible without the opportunities to meet and discuss face-to-face, both within structured meetings and more informal settings. The consequence is that individual and collective research activities and outputs are informing learning and teaching within the differing institutional studio constructs. These collaborations, with the exception of Moroccan events, have been funded exclusively through the ERASMUS programme. This funding conduit encourages staff and student exchange and

without this source, these initiatives would have been impossible to deliver. The final conclusion we would make sits outside of the academic discipline framework of architecture. There is, without doubt, a powerful social element to these collaborations for both students and staff that encourage and expand peer and professional relationships and in terms of students, particularly enhance their life experience through transcultural interaction

#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Fritjof Capra is a physicist and is founder of the Center for Eco-literacy

<sup>ii</sup> Capra, F. 2003. *The Hidden Connections*. P 105/106 Harper Collins. London.

<sup>iii</sup> Full-time equivalent (FTE)

<sup>iv</sup> Olaf Feld. P. 2009. *Sverre Fehn – The Pattern of Thoughts*. P. 42. The Montacelli Press. New York. US

<sup>v</sup> *ibid*

<sup>vi</sup> The First and Second Symposia were organized by the Utzon Research Center in Aalborg, Denmark.