The Exploding (Architecture) School: Architecture and Urban Pedagogy in the City, the case of the Urban Studies Centres in Britain 1968-1988

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This paper examines the history of thirty-seven ‘urban studies centres’ in Britain where architects, planners and teachers collaborated to use the city as a classroom. The centres ‘exploded’ the architecture school into the urban environment, making architecture and planning accessible to a wider set of people. Developed during the 1970s, the ‘urban studies centres’ (USCs) were a network of local self-organized spaces in towns and cities in England, Scotland and Wales. They used architectural and urban pedagogies to increase the engagement of citizens with their urban areas aiming to broaden people’s participation in the construction of their cities. Rooted in environmental education and community action, USCs advocated for an approach to learning based on local realities with a focus on social change.

This paper studies how these centres and other related initiatives during the 1970s and 1980s intended to expand people’s perception and guide them into a critical inquiry of their surroundings. A product of an interdisciplinary approach with radical origins, the
USCs sought to include learning about the urban environment in schools and communities in order to achieve a more holistic human development and a better integration with civic life.

This paper argues that USCs made possible two learning outcomes: firstly, it prepared and guided communities involved to participate in the construction of the city; but also, it enabled professionals to develop a more ethically, politically and socially aware form of practice. This research investigates the role of architects, planners and teachers as educational mediators in these centres, the sites that they used and the practices they developed to increase the interest of people in the built environment. Through newly conducted interviews and unpublished archival material, this paper will discuss the advantages and limitations of these past initiatives in order to extract lessons for a critical urban pedagogy today.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Sol Perez-Martinez, is an architect, researcher and educator. Before her research in the UK, Sol lectured at the Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile and ran an architectural practice where she and her firm partners developed projects for both private clients and the Chilean government. Their last public building was a school in the South of Chile which encouraged her research about environment, education and engagement. Since 2013, Sol has collaborated with teachers and architects developing educational programs, conferences and exhibitions to widen the participation of young people and communities in the construction of the city. Sol is a registered architect in Chile and holds a professional degree in architecture, a master’s in architecture and a master’s in architectural history. Currently, she is a PhD candidate at the Bartlett School of Architecture and the Institute of Education, UCL while also working as an architecture consultant, curator and researcher in Chile and the UK.