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For a participatory architecture

by Emilie Frenkiel

How can we move beyond abstract architecture, where buildings are constructed without their audiences? Peter Ferretto's method is based on observation, engagement, and the osmosis between teaching, practice, research, and social impact.

Peter W. Ferretto is an architect, lecturer and director of the School of Architecture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and affiliated with Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, or CASBS. He founded Condition Lab in 2018, with the aim of contributing through responsible design to the improvement of living conditions, particularly in Gabo. In this Dong village in Hunan, China, he spends several weeks immersed with his students before developing prototypes with local artisans, mixing old and new techniques and materials to meet the needs that villagers express.

He practiced architecture for fifteen years with Herzog & De Meuron, then with his own firm PWFERRETTO, before becoming an academic. He has written several books, including : Ferretto, P. W. (2018). « Chasing Ambiguous Coexistence », in J. Nason & J. Nesbit, *Chasing the City*, New York: Routledge, LUO, J., & Ferretto, P. W. (2018). *Lost Urban Conditions of Hong Kong: The Infrastructural Spaces of the Mei Foo Housing Estate. Critical Practice in an Age of Complexity – An Interdisciplinary Critique of The Built Environment*, Tucson, Arizona: AMPS., et Ferretto, P. W. (2017). *Background City: Inhabited Urban Conditions of Hong Kong*. UIA 2017 Seoul World Architects Congress, Seoul.

Books & Ideas: **Isn't it uncommon for an architect to embrace a full-fledged interdisciplinary approach, as your fellowship at CASBS indicates? Is "interdisciplinary" the right way to describe your approach, and if the case arises, what does this mean to you?**

Peter Ferretto: I do think it's a bit uncommon, and I think there are several reasons why it happened and why I came to campus. The first one is the fact that the School of architecture in my university, Chinese University of Hong Kong, is actually in the Faculty of Social Science. This is a rarity in Asia. It happens around the world, but I think we're the only school of architecture in Asia that is in the Faculty of Social Science. That brings a whole different discipline: our focus is social engagement. When I came to campus, the one thing that really attracted me to come here was the *B* of CASBs. For me, the "*B*" means behavior. But what it means is how people engage with a built environment. That was key.

Is it interdisciplinary? Well, it's a great question because it makes me think about what *inter* means. I'm very interested in the *inter*, not the disciplinary. I think the disciplinary we know that in campus. We have anthropologists, economists and all different disciplines, but the *inter-* means *between*, or even better, *among* people. What I do is I try to take architecture away from the conventional notion. If you've seen monographs of architecture, what the modernist do and still do today, there is no pictures of people, the inhabitation of a space is seen as a pollution of the space.

What we're trying to do in our lab, and in writing the book we are writing, is to take that notion that people are connected to architecture. People are about architecture. And the interdisciplinary is in the fact that I'm talking to other people, but I'm learning how, let's say, for example, a sociologist relates to people. It's different: it's looking at ethnicity, it's looking at how you can detect how people behave through surveys. Me, I'm looking at how they interact with space. So, it's fundamentally based on interdisciplinarity. One of the things that I think is nice about this collaboration is that people expect things, they expect that you write a book. My book proposal was architecture with people. But as you write in the chapters, new things arise. And one of the things that arose was this collaboration with sociologists. My lab is designing the project in Kibera, in Nairobi, in Kenya. I present the project to fellows, and then all of a sudden I get input from sociologists. And there's a sociologist looking at disability and access, and all of a sudden, what is the psychological effect of not being able to access a building, and therefore the building that we designed incorporates his take

on what a totally accessible building could be. There's a kind of osmosis going on at campus that, in my opinion, takes interdisciplinarity to another level.

I think one of the things related to this interdisciplinarity is the issue of how we observe. One of the great things I learned here was how anthropologists observe. If you, for example, an architect, an architect would always put the architecture in the foreground. Now, speaking to anthropologists, they put people in the foreground and architecture in the background. I'd like to show you an image that I think is really important. Here is the picture of the bridge. What's interesting about this bridge? It's a Dong minority bridge in China where I worked. And what's incredibly interesting is that people are in the foreground, they inhabit this space, and the architecture becomes background. This is a fundamental message. I think of how we can socially engage with architecture because they inhabit the space, they become the space. And all of a sudden the architecture, this bridge, enables this meeting, this habitation. Even the dwelling of people on a bridge happens through the architecture. But the architecture is not in the foreground.

Books & Ideas: **The condition lab and your recent projects are radically blurring the boundaries between teaching, research, and impactful practice. Could you explain why and how, while giving us insights into your favorite projects? What makes them your favorite projects and could you define what "impact" you are looking for?**

Peter Ferretto: To answer that question, I've got to go back a little bit. I come to academia after 15 years of practice. I worked in practice, I was devoted to working on projects around the world, in seeing how architecture gets built. And then all of a sudden, I realized that I don't want to work for a commercial office. I want to go into academia, but still practice as I enter. There's a kind of a golden rule that people tell you: you've got to separate these three aspects. One is teaching, the other one is research, and the other one is practice. That really doesn't make sense to me.

I try to connect them. If you can imagine a bar, and you divide that bar into three parts, usually what people do is they sort of connect them at the edges. Teaching is slightly connected to research, and research is slightly connected to practice. What I try to do, and this is something that really came out here on campus, is to sort of wrap them to make a cinnamon roll. I wrap all those three so that teaching is in constant contact with research which is in constant contact with practice. And therefore you get

this reciprocity between the two. Now what happens in practice is that, for example, all my teaching is outside of the classroom and therefore my research is outside of the classroom. I go on the field, and then we try to listen and the social impact comes because we are engaging with people.

We don't go to places and give solutions. We go there and take a slow kind of approach: we *listen*. The first thing that you've got to do when you're working in the field, in my opinion, is gain the trust of the community. So, you've got to do a workshop and go back again, gain their trust, show that you're committed to the project. Then the impact happens, because you're able to *listen*. I'll give you an example: when we go there with students, this is completely different than if you were with a private practice, because there's a relationship between the students, the undergraduate students, and the local villagers. After a while, we live in their houses, where there's a sort of empathy that starts to happen, and you listen to their problems. And you understand that everybody needs a better house, everybody needs a washing machine, then you say: "That's not really our role, we can't fix individual problems. What are the more macro-scale problems?" And unanimously they all agree: "It's children. Better education for our children." Therefore, you understand that if you can provide a library for these people, and this is maybe the project that I'm most proud of: the library that we did in Pingtan. This library is interesting because rural education in China is very rigid. It's following a strict curriculum, so when we work in rural villages, we can't work at all with educational programs. That's not allowed.

But what we can do is work in third spaces. So we came out with the idea of a library, but it's a different library because there you learn by playing. Imagine that you are in a classroom, learning maths, arithmetics and Chinese language. Then after school, you can go into a place where you can read a book, but you can also run around, you can play hide and seek and you can do a drawing. There's no places where you can sit down, and so you are encouraged to play. And all of a sudden, again, osmosis starts to happen. You're playing and you're learning. I think that's kind of one of the most important "impacts" of the fact that we can listen to the community.

The second important aspect of the project, again, of the Pintang Library, is that there's an erosion of heritage. And so if you see these – especially Dong minority villages in China and all minorities in China – have beautiful architecture, what's happening is the villages are hollowing. People are leaving the village, people that can work, people between the ages of 18 and 60 go away, leaving their children behind.

The children grow up with their grandparents, and they're extremely proud of their heritage, which is manifested in these beautiful buildings.

In the case of the Dong minority, that's timber buildings. But they see these buildings as old and they're kind of nearly obsolete. What we try, by also reading and working with people, for example in Unesco, is seeing how you can keep that heritage alive. We come up with this notion of "living heritage". "Living heritage" means that you don't freeze it, you don't make it a museum: you keep it contemporary and you try to go exactly to the DNA of the issue. If you talk to the carpenters,therefore you understand how buildings are put together and their frames, you get that knowledge. And, only by working with a carpenter can you get that knowledge. Once you get that, then we say to the carpenter, "okay, how can we translate this into a contemporary version?" And all of a sudden, we have a design. The students design it with the carpenters. We present this to the local chief, to the villagers, to the women's association, and all of a sudden you have a project that they feel extremely proud of, because it's their heritage, yet it's translated in a contemporary take. I think the impact comes at two levels. One, we are able to research in the field and students are able to engage in these three parts of teaching, research and practice. Two, we are able to make a difference and work with the community. We work with local carpenters. You know, I'm half Italian, and so we use this word which is called a *minestrone* – where you just put everything in and it becomes a *minestrone*. But the *minestrone* is extremely tasteful because it's got all the ingredients of community, education coming together.

Books & Ideas: **Is it right to interpret your projects as design blending, heritage preservation and practical solutions to modern needs?**

Peter Ferretto: I think it's an important question of how we address the issue of heritage. I think there's a lot of confusion between these two words, heritage and preservation. And we kind of think in order for heritage to be alive, you've got to preserve it.

I give you an example: In these villages – they're rural villages in mountainous areas of China, Hunan – the Dong minority people are a minority of about 4 to 5 million people that live in this area. And the villages are always connected to a river and have been practically autonomous for over 400 years now. In the last 30 to 20 years, this has changed. It's not a change, which is kind of gradual; it's a change, in a way, violent. I say violent because you can imagine that you've been building with a single

material, every building that they have, whether it's a community building or a house, is built in timber. You plant the timber when your first boy is born: you go out into the forest, you plant it. And then eventually, when he reaches 18, the tree is felled and you build a house for him. So there's a whole ritual within the village and within their culture. And now all of a sudden, there's a new material that bypasses this, which is called concrete. Alot of what happens in China is that, as soon as one person builds a concrete house, then they realize: "all of a sudden we have running water, all of a sudden we can have different spans, we can have bigger spaces." And the environment changes. Our take on heritage is that you've got to work with these materials that if timber has developed over 400 years, we've got to slowly, enable concrete to come in and to work as a hybrid together.

We're not saying that you deny concrete. We know this, but we've got to work together. And so one of the things that we've noticed is that many people build new houses in concrete and then feel very uncomfortable, and so they feel uncomfortable because they don't have a sense of belonging, but most importantly because the building can't breathe. It's a different type of building, right? It's a very hermetic building. And therefore what we try to do is we go back always to the DNA, we look at the frame and see what elements, for example, the flooring, flooring can still be timber and the structure could still be concrete. On that level we try to work with heritage rather than preserve heritage.

We work a lot with craft people, carpenters, and we try to understand their craft. What's beautiful is that Dong architecture is very humble, yet it's very complicated to put together. It is the opposite, for example, of a Japanese building where all the joints are expressed: in this Dong Chinese architecture, all the joints are hidden. Therefore you need to work with a carpenter to understand that heritage of how the joints work and how the buildings are built. So for example, if you see the building, you think this is erected in a certain way. No, it's erected according to very important philosophical, nearly cosmological laws. They follow feng shui laws. They follow cosmological thinking in the fact that you can only build in certain periods. So what I'm trying to say is that heritage is not simply physical, it's both tangible and intangible. And I think it's by living in the village that you can connect to that heritage.

Books & Ideas: **A specificity of your work is to create the conditions where students, researchers, beneficiaries and local craftsmen can design projects together. Did this peculiar methodology originate in the specific conditions of the Hunan Dong Village Global, where these projects have taken place, reflecting a radical**

pedagogical principle of yours, according to which students are capable of learning through conducting research and direct practice?

Conditions in a way, are at the core of what we do, and is also in the name of our lab. As a verb it means to condition something, to change something, to apply something. This notion that you look at something and then you change it. Our approach is to design not in terms of starting from a *tabula rasa* and then going in and making something new, but it's always calibrating. You have to look, to observe, you have to really understand before you change anything. That's why conditions are really important. The second point relates to a little bit of the methodology that you ask. I was thinking about this for a long time and as I was here, as I was writing the book, which is basically the theory for the work, I came across the work of the British anthropologist Tim Ingold. His idea, related to anthropology, is that to teach anthropology is to practice it. And then he says, in the same quote, that to practice anthropology is to teach it. There is a *vice versa* between teaching and practicing and in my opinion, in the condition lab, in the work that we do, it's very much the same thing.

You could take away anthropology and use the word architecture. In order to teach architecture, you have to practice it, and to practice architecture, you have to teach it. That's fundamental. I've been teaching at CUHK for ten years, and I realized that something radical had to change in architectural education. I set up to change the curriculum, so that every class that I teach is outside the classroom. Now, you can imagine that's not easy because it means insurance: it means risk, students going out, students building things… But if students don't connect and don't feel the material, don't feel the person who they're building for, there's a disconnection.

Therefore, I think a lot of architecture is treated in the realm of the abstract. You build building spaces in abstract, but you never talk to the people who are going to live in them. We do the opposite: we talk to the people and we listen. It is extremely important for us.

As soon as I arrived to Hong Kong, I went on a heritage trip to minority villages in China. And I was speaking to a professor, Professor Lin Kai, who was recording and surveying all these villages in China. She recorded them, had beautiful drawings and books, but yet, these villages were dying at an unprecedented rate. So yes, we can record them, yes, we have the data, but if we don't actually do something, they are going to disappear. There's a famous statistic, that more than 300 villages a week are dying in China. It's a very active problem. What we did is we engaged directly, and

went and took students to actually live in the field work. The course I run every summer is literally a month. We live among 40 to 50 students, and through living, we understand. There's no student who can make any kind of project without asking and speaking.

The type of projects we do are also interesting. We frame them under the word "prototype". "Prototype" means something that you sort of make and pretest before you put it out. But for us, it is also a little bit different. It's a building, something that is built that has to have a "one-to-one" dimension. It means that if you're making a chair, if you're making a table, you make it, and then you use it with the community to see if it works or it doesn't.

We started off with some very small public spaces, temporary buildings made by students, and went on. These are one-to-one buildings built by students with local carpenters that cost, it's incredible, around 50,000 HK *(around 6,000 $ and 5,800 €)*. The power that a student can have by talking to a carpenter, listening to the community, engaging with the community and then building a one-to-one prototype, this was something that radically changed the way we do research. I think it's the reason why the campus let me come here, because it's a different type of research. It's not just simply a project that is born from an idea and then implemented, and then you go away. It's built with the community, and then you go back and you understand how the community engages with it and you learn from it, so that the next project that you do, it incorporates all the lessons that you've learned from the first one.

Book & Ideas: **Could you define who the people in the "people centered" approach you promote are?**

Peter Ferretto: The "people" is actually a very diverse range of people. First and foremost, it is my role as a teacher. I believe in teaching and I believe that there's a very important role, especially as an architect, to teach the young generation. I live in Hong Kong and our school is committed to social engagement. A lot of the students that we have want to have that kind of exposure, to help in the community. The first "people" are the students. I'm teaching a class where I have undergraduates that are 19 years old, master's students that are 25 years old, and PhD students that are 35 years old. I'm teaching a spectrum. The second kind of people are also students, but these are the students that usually use the libraries: these are children that have very little amenities. They usually don't have books. The grandparents that raise their children, do it in a certain way. For example, the grandparents are not aware of the dependency or the addiction of a phone. So all the kids have a phone, but the grandparents don't think

this is any harm. Children are all day on the phone, or they are playing video games in small video rooms. Here, the “people” are the children to which we build libraries for.

How do you engage with the local students? You present the project, and you ask the children of the school what they would like, and they say they all want a building that looks like their traditional Dong house. The issue of a traditional Dong house is that it's going to be very dark, and it has no stairs. But they said: “oh, that's what we want”. So we work with that. Then one of the girls says, “Actually we have a dream. We want a building without a door.” And so, all of a sudden, the people, the children are expressing how they want the designs to sort of translate. You can imagine, as an architect, that designing a building that doesn't have a door is very difficult. And then, we design this building that has a staircase that comes down like a little bit like a tongue coming down. And there is no door. But then, you think about what that does to the general public: this building belongs to the whole community. It's a building that you can't lock at night. All of a sudden, the “people” become the community. The building learns from that.

Architecture has this sense of empowerment. It can empower communities. And I think if architects go back to empowering, and if architects have the capacity to be humble, to listen, then architecture can change.

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