

IDEA AND SPIRIT OF SEVEN YEARS OF DESIGN AND CRAFTS BASED WORKSHOPS AND RESEARCH ON SITE

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Abstract: *This paper is a holistic overview of 7 years of experimental design workshops and their vocational approach towards non-formal education in the field of design. The research highlights more than 10 years' experience of the authors in organizing the workflow for a series of one-week international design workshops in Romania and Austria. Each workshop had a special topic but all of them were linked by a common scope: interventions in private and public spaces with inspiration and respect for the local built environment, culture, traditions and crafts.*

Key words: *non-formal education, design, workshop, experimental research, on-site investigation.*

1. Introduction

Seven workshops in ten years can become a consistent guideline for open-minded academic education, non-formal-teaching occupying a more significant role in contemporary methods. In this case, the workshops not only enhanced the students' experience in modern research methods, but also inspired teachers in

creating an organized guideline for research, exercises and projects.

These 7-day workshops are a collaboration between universities from Romania and Austria – *Transilvania* University from Brasov (UTBv), New Design University from Sankt Pölten (NDU), and *Ion Mincu* Architecture and Urbanism University from Bucharest (UAUIM). The first workshop began in 2011 in Brasov with the theme "window

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and wall“ [6], which was followed by five workshops in Dealu Frumos, the geographical center of Romania – in a small, former Saxon village where UAUIM is the owner of several properties appropriate for organizing this kind of workshops and research projects for students. These properties include the fortified church and its ensemble, the Elementary School (Volksschule), and a Saxon property.

From 2017 the workshop continued in a new location in Târgu Lăpuș with an extended team, including our new partners – and generous hosts, “Petru Rareș” Theoretical High School, “Grigore C. Moisil” Technological High School, and the community of Târgu Lăpuș, Maramureș County [8].

2. Experimental Methods

The workshop structure functions on three levels: the first one focuses on research, the second on exercises based on the conclusions gained during the research, and the last layer is the most visible one with concrete results, i.e., the projects.

The first layer, the research, focuses on working with and in the local and rural context. This type of analytical exercise looks for qualities and characteristics of villages and local areas, aiming at a respectful, collaborative artistic dialogue with the villagers, the environment and the landscape, thinking and discussing about the local and rural spirit, reality and potential.

The second layer is the one that contains the exercises based on the experience of designing and creating through craft based on fundamental material and formal processes. Students

learn how to explore the characteristics and qualities of materials and techniques, developing methods to understand forming parameters, material and structure.

The third and most visible layer is the project, which in the case of these workshops, has targeted the rural and local places, based on the research, constructing and formal experiences of the exercise and based on the interaction between teachers – students – local community, discussions and thoughts.

Regarding the way we organize the workflow during the one-week workshop, it can be stated that all the above-mentioned layers (research, exercise, and project) are gradually introduced to students with the help of the work modules.

Before entering the research subject, students are guided to form *mixed working groups* based on their commonly shared personal skills and abilities. The next step consists in defining the *group identity*. The working group consists of students and pupils from all the institutions involved, each of them having their own socio-cultural and professional development. The group identity involves adopting a name and creating a visual identity, both of these being representative for the members of the group.

The aim of this introductory phase is for students to have a moment of reflection and personal interrogation, to explain what they are driven by, to synthesize what they are defined by both personally and as a group. This experience also comes with the conceptual and graphic expression of ideas and characteristics that make up the expression of the group. The final input is a synthesis of all the

information on a poster, stimulating creativity, visual language and competition.

Once past this introductory phase, the research can begin with the *measurement and perception of space*. Space investigation has two main components: the qualitative one, which investigates, gathers, and analyses data on the human-to-space relationship (we come to know and to become aware of space), and the quantitative component, which investigates and aggregates information regarding dimensions, position, limitations, obstacles, etc.

3. Research and Inspiration in the Local Area – Visible Elements

Sensory perception of space is defining. Human - space interaction is in constant change, this relationship is never static, depending on boundaries, routes, directions, observation points, and center, central or strong objects (Figure 1).

Humans live orientated and closely linked to the visible elements of the

landscape or built environment. The orientation system has archetypal roots: up / down; hill / valley; front / rear; left / right; forward / back. Instinctively, following these, analyzing, and describing this interaction with space enables the creation of sensations of freedom, suffocation, constraint, routing on a particular channel, etc. All these are very important in the qualitative description of space and can become mechanisms of space creation [1].

One of the most frequently used instruments developed for qualitative investigation and for preliminary quantitative spatial data collection is the step-by-step measurement. This relies on the human body as a measuring instrument and involves a prior preparation of the correspondence from each step and the metric of measurement of the length. This creates a system of measurement and sensory perception of space which offers a profound knowledge of space.

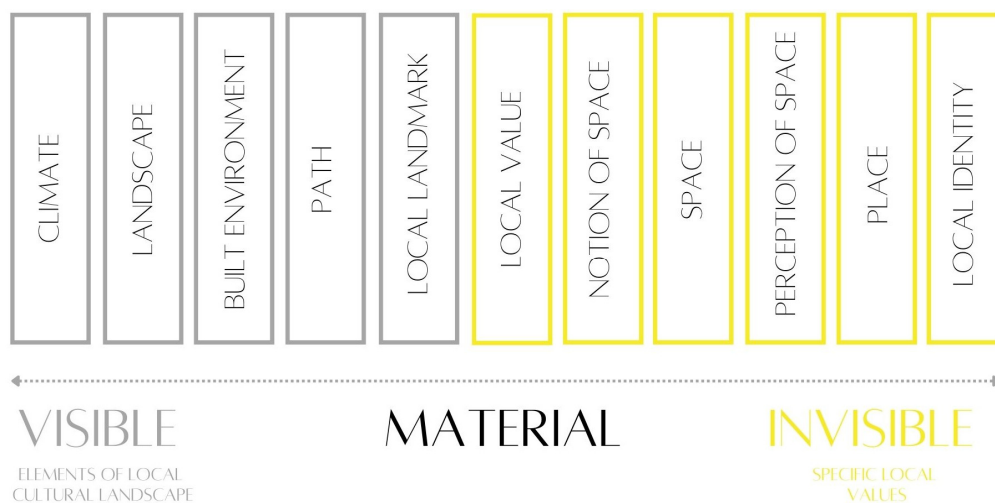


Fig. 1. *Diagram of space perception and experience – local identity*

The educational aim of these workshops is to enhance the students' desire to work on site, to explore and deal with methods of measuring using tape and by footsteps, creating hand-drawn plans, utilizing different scales, etc. This process employs technical documentation and visualization, but an empirical approach and understanding of the environment, the structural qualities of space; atmosphere and space vibes are needed. The measuring process is accompanied by an observing pattern that visually scans the built environment, investigating through an empirical lens all visible elements of the landscape: climate, land, topography, terrain, panorama, countryside, vegetation, buildings, fences, materials, structures, infrastructure, gardens, people, etc.

The outcome of this phase of research and perception of the local visible elements results in sketches, hand drawn plans, measurements by footsteps, different rituals of measuring and observing, and an empirical, subtle observation protocol.

4. Research of Specific Values – Invisible Elements

The visible elements are a major influence in shaping the future concept of the project, but without the analysis of the invisible components that define a specific local value, we risk having small success in implementing efficiently the desired architectural intervention. After a detailed research of all the visible elements such as the landscape, the built environment and climate, this approach continues with an in-depth holistic analysis of the local values, the places with special significance for the local community, the traditions

and local identity. Another key factor is the way students perceive space and comprehend the way locals relate to the perception of space and what space utilization patterns result from this process. It is important to know all these constants of a rural landscape, not only the built, but also the unbuilt, which is becoming more important than ever in this kind of experimental on-site investigation.

All these components (visible and invisible) create together the concept of local identity with its historical, cultural, social, rural, and material characteristics. This holistic overview converted into a project description, but moreover sketches, drawings, photographs, and collages can visually express the results of the experimental on-site investigation of the rural landscape.

All the workshop venues were selected based on this holistic criterion: the existence of rural landscape untouched by artificial urbanization and modern technologies, places with strong symbolic relevance and with high significance for the on-site investigation of the built environment.

5. Every Workshop Has its Own Experience

The first workshop, *Window and Wall*, was organized in 2011 in Brasov at Transilvania University between 7th-14th May. UTBv initiated this experimental non-formal educational experience in collaboration with the New Design University from Sankt Pölten, Austria. Teachers and students had the opportunity to cooperate and exchange ideas working for the same objectives for one whole week.

The workshop concept articulates the multiple senses that windows can have in organizing a building or allowing light inside them (Figure 2). Interior design has undergone to a large extent an adaptation custom of historic buildings for contemporary conditions [8], this requiring a responsiveness and comprehension of the given structural and historical background. Due to their

intricate framing, most historic windows are being substituted by new windows that fulfill current technological standards, so in order to sympathize the with construction attributes and characteristics, the students had the chance to restore a historic window along with the contemporary intervention.

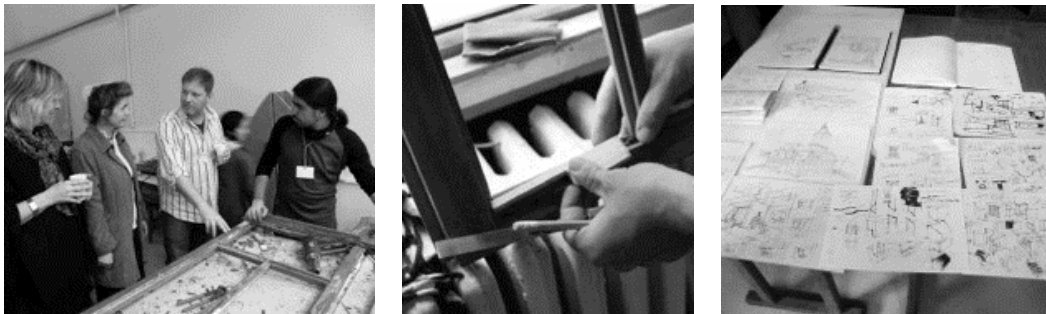


Fig. 2. *First interaction and lectures about "Window and Wall"- through the work of Palladio and Michelangelo* (Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2011)

Besides experimenting with space, the students had the chance to work with different materials such as cardboard and plaster (Figure 3). One of the projects worked with triangular slots oriented in multiple directions through the wall. This

concept was implemented using a rectangular cast in which liquid plaster was poured inside the wall thickness; resulting in a dynamic composition of light beams.

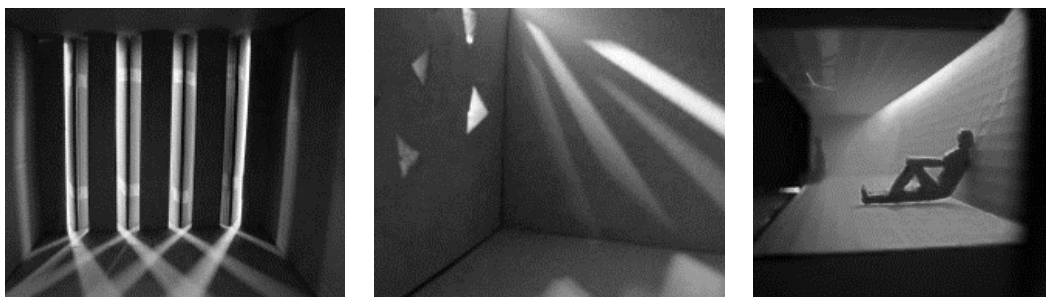


Fig. 3. *Primary models scale 1:10 made of cardboard* (Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2011)

Looking at the models it is visible what importance the "light breaking through

the wall" has gained. The way light is reflected on the floor and on the walls

creates a linear geometric pattern, defining zones of warm light and color and of overlapping of reflections or light-strips.

If the research project “Window and Wall” (2011) from Brasov tackled the window as an expressive, structurally diaphanous object, interacting with the building and its surroundings, the workshop the following year expanded upon this theme in Dealu Frumos, Sibiu County, between 13th – 19th May 2012 [6] (Figure 4). This time a reflection based on the design appearance within the transition area between the inside or outdoor space of buildings was the leitmotif that also named the workshop “Inside, Outside, In-Between I” (Figure 5).

The workshops took place in the building of the Elementary School of Dealu Frumos, owned by the *Ion Mincu* Architecture and Urbanism University from Bucharest and focused on the profound investigation into the sense of space, how we perceive, create and model it. Students utilized models and scale-size human figures in the attempt to explore different psychological relationships between space and building elements. The further development of these ideas generated edificial and structural constellations that enabled new typological examples for the correlation between inside and outside spaces.



Fig. 4. *Dealu Frumos -The fortified church seen from the Saxon cemetery (left), working on the “Poster & Identity” in mixed groups (UTBv, UAUIM, NDU) (Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2012)*

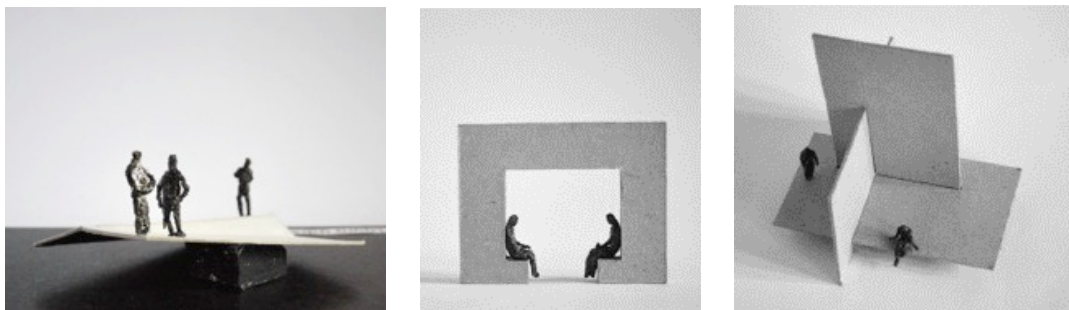


Fig. 5. *Cardboard models with human figures. Objects as an expression of spatial and psychological scenography (Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2012)*

Another glance was necessary for the topic of this workshop, so a second version of the Inside, Outside, In-Between II was organized in Dealu Frumos between 7th – 13th April 2013 (Figure 6). This continued the research regarding space and its qualitative and metaphorical characteristics by creating small study models, which reflect and deal with both empirical and objective space perception.

A solid step in the non-formal education process consisted in bringing the workshop program in relation with the village (Dealu Frumos / Schönberg), visiting it on different routes with a prepared plan with already proposed significant places to see. By walking and looking around, each student group had to decide and choose a place for the future project.



Fig. 6. *Initial exploration of the village “looking for good places”. Center of Dealu Frumos, survey of former abandoned gypsy houses* (Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2013)

After this phase, all groups had their own chosen place in the village and started working on the scenographic models. These should express and recreate the atmosphere and spirit of their selected location. The models were understood as real sized interventions, which radiate possibly a certain vibe or create multiple symbolic narrative situations with the simplest elements [9]. Obviously, it is an artistic way of interpreting space, experimenting with on-site investigations, drawings, models, and ideas. But this can become a methodical mechanism of shaping various spatial perceptions.

The analytic-empiric maps complete the project with posters that visualize the topographic situation, the mineral and built environment, and that explain the qualities of the place. Nevertheless, the most important phase of the project

remains the involvement and discourse with a place in the village, creating a sound connection with the direct environment.

The following year, in 2014 we took the next step in the project development and launched into a more profound subject, the one of Interventions in *Public Spaces – Rural Everyday and Festive Places*. Dealu Frumos is a village integrated in a marvelous hilly landscape and a specific gable roofed Saxon household being the characteristic architectural object for the built environment. However, the way of life in the village underwent capital transformations in the 20th century including wars, political and social instability, change of ethnographic segments, and change of property [7]. These echoes of the former German community have inspired us in creating a research topic in order to make students

empathize with their research subject.

From an outsider's point of view the story and relations of the village seem almost incomprehensible in such a short time – every village having its own character and personality [4]. The main

rhetorical question of the workshop was if specific everyday rural experience, seen from the research point of view and profound human connection with the local inhabitants can be made on such short notice (Figure 7)?



Fig. 7. Preliminary sketches of Thomas Gronegger, preparing the models and drawing analytical maps of the rural spatial context (Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2013)

The experience of the workshop from 2013 has also shown that even if our research time was limited to one week, it was possible to connect with the potential

of strong places in the village. Getting more into the core of the village, we discovered how small scale interventions can have a big impact on a rural scale

through their subtle and respectful way of integrating inside the built environment. After four years of conducting this workshop, we could finally develop and help students assimilate a mechanism that looks less for functional components but

focuses more on impulse and archaic spirit (Figure 8). Fewer calculated interventions and shapes instead of a more intrinsic poetry that completes the existing rural landscape, made students empathize with what they discovered on-site.

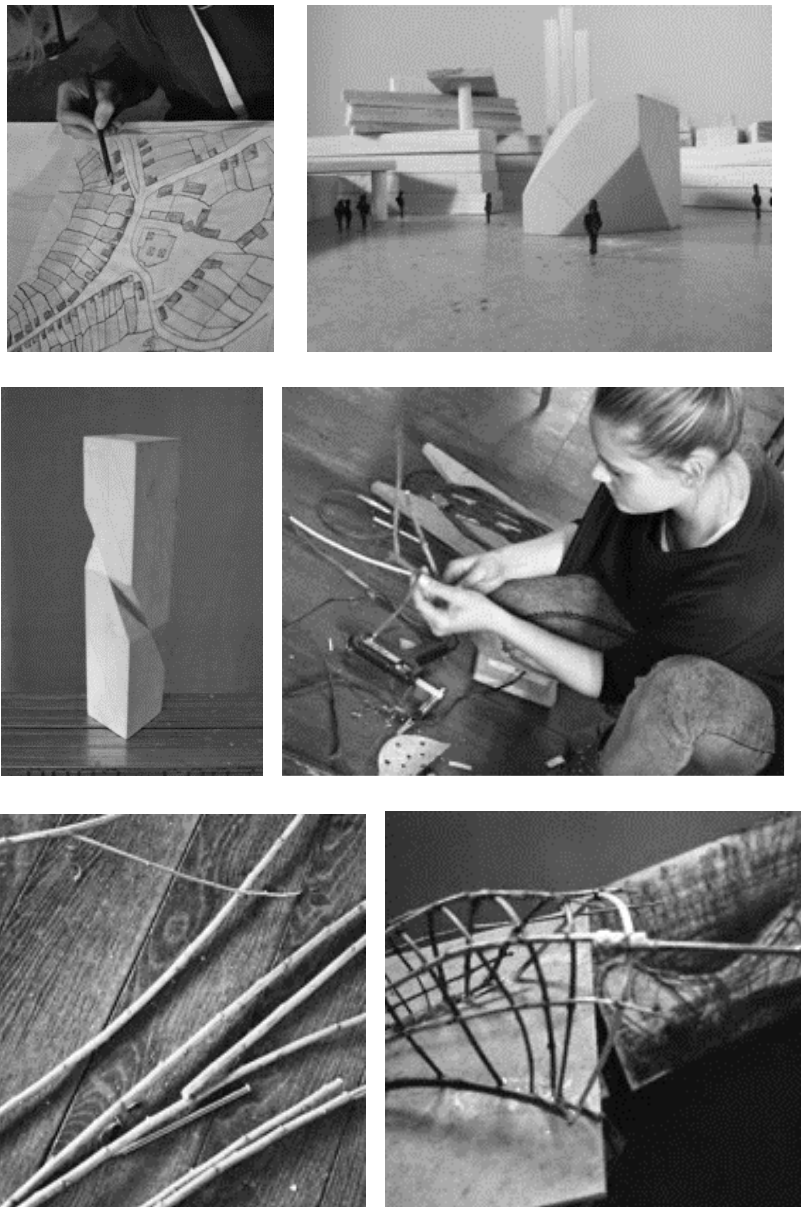


Fig. 8. *Working in three groups with independent design methods and techniques: folding, wooden twigs and plaster* (Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2014)

In 2015, “Metamorphosis of a Household I”, the main idea of the workshop evolved around a Saxon house from Dealu Frumos, which recently became property of the “Ion Mincu” Architecture and Urbanism University with the aim of developing a new space for future workshops, seminars, and exhibitions.

The request of proposing a design for this space gave us a large array of possible solutions, purposes, and interplays which can be related to our past experience and know-how gained in the previous workshops organized in Dealu Frumos. The target was clear; our students had to come up with solutions for spaces for craft.

The main challenge for students will remain the overlapping of past and contemporary needs and functions: how

can the spaces of a former rural household be adapted for experimental design workshop activities, thinking, planning and craft?

The first step was one of empathizing with the farmers, the original builders and inhabitants of the house, understanding the structural-formal, functional typology of the rural Saxon household and developing new approaches for the old spaces (Figure 9). The former living spaces can become spaces for exhibition, full of natural light and open space; the former barn can become a place for crafts, prototyping, the garden can transform into a large outdoor amphitheater [3], [5]. A series of sketches, analytical maps and models resulted after the one week workshop, all of these materials setting a solid background study for the implementation of the future project.



Fig. 9. *Walking in the village, measuring the household, creating models and 1:1 scale prototypes using wood, cardboard, textile materials (Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2015)*

The following workshop in 2016 (Figure 10), also taking place in Dealu Frumos, proposed to continue on a more profound

level the sensible thoughts about the rural household developed in 2015. So, “Metamorphosis of a Household II”

extended the area of analysis from a small scale to a rural scale, including several households and public emphasizing construction techniques, human scale prototypes and exploring the shape/space of the household and its connections with

the rural context, getting in contact with the village by organizing walks together with the students, measuring by steps, contemplating local identity and the spirit of places.



Fig. 10. *Prototypes made of wood, cardboard and concrete placed in the household courtyard (Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2016)*

Students realized models of the household / property as base for their research in finding and creating “good places of coming together, thinking, and working” and implemented real size objects using wooden platforms, logs, and textiles [2], [9].

The assembling of the wooden platform is based on simple joints and structural elements such as wooden boards and beams without nails or screws. The

horizontal level offers a support system for the vertical compositions defined by a network of pillars. This real size structure enhances a dynamic yet balanced spatial and visual relationship with the traditional built heritage of the Saxon household. This is one of the main conclusions of the on-site investigation, of the open work sessions and discussions between the teachers and students (Figure 11).



Fig. 11. *Work in progress on the prototype: execution and assembling of the modules in the workspace and placing them in their final position in the courtyard of the household (Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2016)*

In 2017, the venue of the workshop moved to Maramureş County, Târgu Lăpuş, between 13th – 20th May with a

concept that focused on “People, Craft and Tradition”. The students (groups) developed their own methodic strategies

and an extensive range of alternatives – from the simplest to more complex configurations.

The change of place brought also the enlargement of the workshop team, involving two local high schools in the workflow. In this new venue the focus and investigation approached: the wattles (made of twigs) [11], the traditional wood structures of the region (gates, roof, walls) (Figure 12), the organizing patterns of the household and the relation between the house, barn, and garden on multiple layers, the life and stories of the local people.

The workshop was guided by two main principles: research on site and investigation of the wooden traditional local built environment (the visible elements), and the next, the one including the invisible components that reflect the features and potential of the local space, shaping objects, and integrating weaving structures [9]. These objects create connections with the living spaces of the scholars and at the same time, create a new spatial connection with the school-campus.



Fig. 12. *Woven structures inspired by local fences and archetypes*
(Photo: Thomas Gronegger, 2017)

6. Results and Discussions

The spirit and the attitude regarding this workshop focus on developing rules for working and observing methodically; using simple materials, techniques, and starting with simple forms; exploring the qualities and poetry of simple structures. The experimental research on site, the non-formal educational approach also enhances the development of creative

ideas and ways of thinking that will help students refine and improve their own creative mechanisms [10].

The workshop is not about looking for the new and never seen, but about understanding and establishing relations based on the existing qualities of rural or local characteristics (forms, structures, typologies – and also contents and typical social relations).

7. Conclusions

Based on this experience of seven years in organizing international design workshops in Romania, a joint activity between Romanian and Austrian teachers and their students, several directions and perspectives for non-formal education in

the design field were discovered, formulated, and experimented.

Our focus was to inspire collaboration between different groups of students in a wonderful intact cultural, rural agricultural area. In addition, the working and perception process with all our senses – and heart is an important element in our vision (Figure 13).

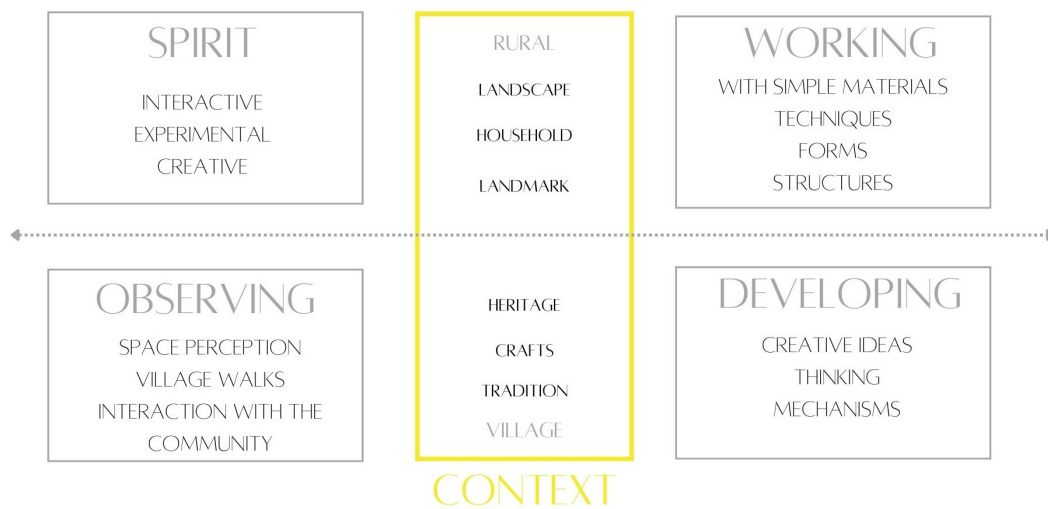


Fig. 13. *Workshop spirit and experience*

The idea and spirit of seven years of design and crafts based workshops and investigation on site is to enhance the courage to do our best – not only by working, but also by resting, looking, walking, reflecting, thinking, and enjoying. We need to have the courage not to finalize everything, but also to show fragments of a creative work process that can inspire evermore.

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