

“Our time is faced with many challenges: climate change, overuse of resources, destruction of ecosystems etc. Tackling these challenges demands a paradigm change. We want to encourage open discussion that challenges the current paradigm among students of architecture, landscape architecture and interior architecture, young professionals from the field or anyone who is interested.” (You Tell Me – Symposium Facebook event)

The You Tell Me -Symposium was organised in November 2019 by a group of young architects and architecture students in Helsinki, Finland. The event was an attempt to start the architectural-paradigm change, inviting promoters of sustainable construction such as Suoja ry and VAPAA collective to share their thoughts.

Their long-term goal is to launch a movement of discussion and peer learning in the field of architecture, by also offering tools for introducing peer learning in our learning and work environments.

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*Could you explain what exactly the Symposium event was?*

ELLA It was a brainchild which was born when me, Isabelle and Matti started to talk and hang out together. We shared this feeling of being a bit lost in our studies and feeling a bit frustrated with the situation; that there wasn't enough discussion about sustainability and values. We didn't feel that the things that we were taught helped us to become the architects that we wanted to be. So, we decided that we should come up with our own event and to ask people that we feel can teach us, to teach us there. There was a lot of luck with us, since we were also contacted by Suoja organization, which is an NGO trying to work on criticizing the construction culture in Finland and who are doing research on that.

JOONAS They want to promote health and sustainability.

E And they want to have a chance to talk with students. So, we came to the conclusion that we could arrange an event together, that they would come and speak, and we would come up with the place and audience and the structure of the event. In the end, we ended up having more, so there was Delphine Rumo who is studying creative sustainability in Aalto and who is also studying materials; there was VAPAA collective, they are examining the architects role in the era of climate change; and the fourth one was EASA Estonia because they are so close and we wanted an EASA point of view of student activism.

MATTI Everything started from this point that we don't talk enough about what we do in architecture studies; we do a lot, we produce plans and images, but we don't always stop to think: what are we doing and is this sustainable? So, we decided to do this. Symposium was kind of an excuse for us to talk to these interesting people and we had good luck that Suoja contacted us and we had been to Vapaa collective's workshops and we got the speakers involved and pretty quickly we had this idea that we wouldn't just leave it to this Symposium. Symposium would be this starting point where we would start the conversation and hopefully from there, we would create this discussion culture where we as students talk more about: what do we do? And why do we do it? To talk more about ethics and sustainability. It has started now but we are on a kind of hiatus because of the virus, which is kind of unfortunate.

E Basically, the main point was to develop the discussion culture among young architects and architecture students and to gather a group of people who would come together regularly and make a change together.

*What is the idea of the following events you're currently planning?*

E The idea was to continue after the Symposium and arrange these regular weekly or monthly smaller meetings, which serve as a stage for students to come up with their own topics or own questions. That we could have a space where everyone could bring a topic and, in a group, we would learn together like in a peer-learning system. We started in

February and we managed to arrange two meetings and then the coronavirus thing came. So, we can't really gather together anymore.

M It started as basically just these get-togethers and in the first one we had this theme of: who are we designing for? Talking about, 'do we design architecture only for people or are nature and other sentient beings also stakeholders?', and Ella also prepared this really good essay or speech about post-human thinking. So, Ella kind of prepped them first and then we kind of hung out there and our friend said that she would be up for hosting, or doing an intro, for modernism and what modernism means in the global context. She did her thesis about modernist theatre building in Uganda and she wants to kind of point out that modernism isn't this Western thing but that there is tropical modernism and modernism all over the world. The idea was that we would host the first one and launch the 'evening schools' – that's what we call these meetings – and in the first one we kind of threw the ball to the audience, that 'hey, we don't want to organize all of these, so if anyone is up for hosting one evening, we can provide the space and time and bring food and resources' and then the participants would bring the content. We were supposed to have one yesterday but then this whole virus situation came.

E Also, I wanted to say that we chose to arrange these meetings in the university, in Aalto university, in a quite central place so that also people who didn't know about it could come and join us if they were passing by.

*How did you structure the meetings?*

E In the first one we had a 10-minute speech and after that it was quite free, there was really light moderating, but it was kind of an experiment to see how it works.

J I think the only moderation was needed in the beginning. After Ella's speech people were quite shy, so we opened up with the question: 'why did people come to the meeting?' And with that question we went through everyone and people explained and most of the students felt that there had been a lack of such moments where you could come and learn from others but also speak yourself, so that was the main motivation for people. From then on it flowed quite freely. Maybe twice we needed to point out the main topic of the day because the discussion was steering a bit out of it, but quite freely. So, the idea was that the whole group wanted to stand back and show that we are all students, we are all equal, so we organized in a circle and kind of had no authorities. Or that was the whole point because that's how you promote the idea of evening schools where everyone can teach each other.

E Also, it was thought to be a contrary to these regular seminars where there is always some established speaker and you maybe have a chance to ask one or two questions and it's always about the person who is speaking there.

*The Symposium was opened up for international participants – was there a reason you did that instead of keeping it for local participants?*

E I guess it was a bit hard to define what the target group is, but a lot of it was affected by the EASA background and we felt that we had the chance to arrange a meeting where we could invite students from other Nordic countries or countries that are close-by, like Estonia. Also, I think one reason has been that me and Matti have been working on this Nordic Collaboration – we have invented this thing in Aalto that we would like to do more stuff with Nordic or Baltic countries, so that was one aspect.

M In the beginning we had ambitious plans that we would invite everyone from everywhere and this would be an excuse to get us working together, and it came from the Nordic Collaboration thing. But I think it was good that the Estonians were there, since we have interesting speakers and we put effort into organizing this Symposium, why not invite the neighbours as well? I think we had some people from other Finnish universities as well.

E From Oulu, for example.

*Are there any existing attempts to work on this topic at all, in architecture schools in Finland?*

E I think it's present and I think it's already developing a lot. One thing that came up in Symposium is that there are some voices or some views that are not brought up in the education because they might not be...I don't know how to explain it.

J You mean Suoja?

E Yes.

J So, I can explain a bit about Suoja. Their main goal is to promote sustainable construction methods that are healthy. We have an issue in Finland, and I think everywhere in the world, that the buildings that are built at the moment are not going to last too long. According to the EU legislations, all the buildings except for public buildings and big bridges, so for example residential buildings, the structures are designed to last for 50 years. 50 years is not a long time, and this is for the whole EU. For example, in Finland, we are now tearing down residential areas and buildings from the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s and building new ones. At the same time, we are explaining that this is 'sustainable', which is highly problematic.

So now this NGO has been working for the past 5 years, to make the public aware of the issues we have in construction at the moment. Another thing is that in buildings in Finland, and also worldwide, we are using materials that are not healthy for the environment, but also for the people. For example, in Finland we have huge issues with air quality because we are using chemicals and plastics and other materials that actually dissolve into the indoor air and make people sick. Some of them have been proven to, for example, cause cancer. And when the building doesn't last too long, all this material in the end ends up in landfills because we don't have a working system for recycling construction

materials. So, when people are really caring about the use of plastic and being healthy, they are trying to show that in the large scale we still have so much to do with this.

But they are working against the system of the current construction industry and also the current educational system, because we are being taught the existing ways of construction and to use legislations that actually prohibit older construction methods, for example using massive structures that use complete wood, or brick structures, so actually we don't have these old methods that were healthy and long-lasting. We don't have them anymore; we can't use them anymore. And they are trying to promote them, not to bring back the 100-year-old techniques but to learn from them and to show that there are new iterations of how to use wood or how to use brick. There are new developments in these areas where you reduce the amount of materials used and they are suggesting that we use, I think, only 5-7 different materials that they list, that are healthy for use but also when everything is inevitably going to end up back into nature at some point, that they don't cause any harm there. So, they have been trying to get to teach at Aalto university, but they are being blocked because they are teaching against the common practice.

I studied in Oulu and I think there the teachers are mostly worried about if we will get work, and in that they are doing a great job – we know how architecture offices and construction companies function and the ways they are used. But for anything pioneering there was nothing. We were basically told that “it's impossible”. Only now I feel that there is a big wave of people that are trying to change things.

M That was at the center of the Symposiums and the evening schools, that our buildings don't last more than 50 years, they have way too short lifespans and they cause too much CO2 emissions and this whole sustainability problem. The schools and the people working in architecture in Finland right now are really good professionals and they are really

good at what they were trained to do, the universities are really good at training architects to be professionals who follow regulations and do the work that is expected of them, but now the problem is that the regulations are not up to date to what the world needs. It was from the modernist era, when they didn't know the problem of plastics and the problem of sandwich structures and the problem that you can't just rebuild everything every 50 years.

So now there is this problem that the university needs to change, and we need new knowledge. We need to change everything about how we do things in the construction field and the universities aren't up to task with that. They are starting to think about it, but the professors were educated with this education, when they promoted these construction methods, and they haven't been trained to think about sustainability and so on, so now the thing is that we need to find out how to rethink everything that we do. That's why it's a good addition to have these evening schools; that we can together try to search for this information that the university doesn't have yet.

*I heard that you were asked to rewrite the rules for the building sector.*

M We just wrote an article that is going to be published in this architecture magazine in Finland, and it's going to be published in this architecture magazine in Finland. Their next magazine is going to be about rules in architecture and they asked if we would write about the new rules in architecture and the construction industry, or new rules for architects. What we focused on in that article was about what to do when the rules are not up to date; what to do when you can't just play the game anymore, you have to rework the whole game – set new rules and question everything. It's not enough that you get the

degree and go do your job and what's expected of you. It's not enough to be professional. What does a professional do when you need to question the assignments you're given? When you need to think about, should I build anything at all? It's not enough to do everything that's asked, you have to be thinking critically and questioning: what am I doing and why am I doing it? It's not enough to just know how to do stuff, but to think about why.

*What advice would you give to another young architect or architecture student who feels dissatisfied with their education or professional practice?*

M My advice would be to acknowledge it and then find like-minded people. Find people who are maybe as lost as you are and get a group together and start searching; find allies to help you in this search.

E There are already a lot of practices who have been researching on these topics for decades, years, but it's a matter of finding them and finding the groups and people that are actually working on these matters.

J I think the same goes for everything, when you think about climate change, that there are so many people working already. You just need to look around a bit and find the right people and get inspired by what other people are doing. Either getting active with existing groups or starting something on your own, but just to know that you are never alone.

E I think one thing is to get together. What I've been experiencing when you gather 10-15 people together to talk, then something is generating from those meetings; ways to solve the problems. I guess how to proceed is kind of born in those moments.

M Our hypothesis in the Symposium was this thing that 'change is easier in a group than alone.' We are in this moment in the world, that change is inevitable. We have to change. Either we do it by preparing before shit hits the fan, or we do it after society collapses and then we have to figure out everything. But change is coming anyway.

J I think it's already happened.

M In that way, encouraging that we don't have to settle, things are going to change anyway so you can just start from the mindset that, in our generation, when we graduate, we will change the field. It will have to change. It won't continue as it is.

J To be honest, I think now actually, when the whole world is in a really complex crisis with the virus and also in the economic and environmental sense, this would be the moment to try to rethink. Because we saw that countries are actually capable of doing massive changes in one day. Now we know what is possible, or we've seen an alternative. And now when everyone is still at home, or people are kind of ready to rethink some options when they realise that life is not 'normal', at least for a while, I think now could be a great moment for getting minds together and trying to figure out stuff anew.