



LIZA FIOR

We interviewed Liza, a founder of muf – London based architecture and art practice, specialized in social issues. The only lady of this MIAW talked to us about her beautiful story of entering architectural world and explained her teaching method.

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Emanuele Moro: Which is your education path in architecture and how have you got to your research topic?

Liza Fior: I was encouraged to study architecture by a neighbor who I babysat for. I decided to try and said to myself I would have stayed for three months, made a portfolio and then applied for art school. But then when I started to study I experienced that feeling of I’m going to show them I can do this, so that was how it started. I did my Bachelor in Canterbury, and then I was lucky to go and work with Siza, in the mid 80s. It was a very interesting time in his office – and because I could speak English, when the journalist came, I went to every single Siza building near Porto: that was a great education. Siza used to say to me “If you can sit still for 3 hours you’ll be a great architect”, because I was always going and moving around. It was the first office I had ever worked into, and I thought all the offices were like that. I have been shocked ever since! Then I went to Polytechnic of Central London and it was a fantastic time because all of my teachers were different: I was taught by classicists and radicals, modernists and ecologists – a very varied and good education. The professors argued in public, even if they were friends in private. There I was taught by David Greene of Archigram, who was teaching there. He was studying soft infrastructures: at that time, in the morning, everybody in London used to get milk delivered, so the whole London had their milk delivered at the same time. He saw this as a piece of architecture, a byzantine piece of great geometric complexity. His ability to make visible the invisible and this interest in that was to me a place of recognition. I couldn’t really believe I had a place, necessarily, in architecture: there are these moments in which you are given permission, by your teachers, to make your own way. To me the combination of Siza and David Greene, of formal interest and soft structures coming together, was actually a very good one.

EM: What about your firm and your approach to work and design in terms of methodology?

LF: The range of the office is wide, from large scale urban design strategies and masterplans to small exhibitions: so size, budget and longevity are between our main topics. I can make a description of all our work saying that we interrogate and expand the brief by understanding the circumstances.

EM: Yes, which is also what you were saying in your lecture at Politecnico, about going from detail to general and then back to detail.

LF: Yes, and it’s also this idea of understanding the power relations at the same time as understanding the material topography of the site, at the same time as expanding the brief so that it doesn’t just come from the person writing it – also because our work is only on public projects and if we just did what was asked by the person who writes the brief, we would not be meeting the brief itself. So it’s two things at once: it’s understanding the site and expanding the brief so that it becomes more accurate. This is all about accuracy, it is not about being kind, it is in order to make an accurate response.

EM: There’s something in your method that reminds of the attention Georges Perec gave to human occupancy of space in his *Life a user’s manual*: it’s about being able to observe the details of society and its behavior and even more about making do with the circumstances.

LF: That’s well understood because *Life a user’s manual*, which I’ve read many times, is not about little things but about this attempt to make clear a narrative, which is also something very related to Perec’s life. When he was 5 years old, war happened and he was Jewish, so was taken to the countryside with the half of his family, his father’s family, which was a little bit richer whereas his mother, a hair dresser, stayed in Paris and was then deported and killed. He had a few memories that he was always trying to connect, and when you think in *Life a user’s manual* it’s always about this idea of intersecting circles, some touch and some operate in parallel. So all his writing in a sense is trying to pick the pieces he knows and the pieces he remembers in order to make the full story. So you could describe it as just a small thing, one’s individual emotional life, or you can say: this is the description of a city. The city is sometimes connected and sometimes unconnected to the realities that operate. I can make a whole project from something very small, but I can only make it from something very small if the things I’ve noticed resonates sufficiently that it gives confidence for the wider client to come in.

EM: I would like to know something more about your teaching activity and methodology, also in this MIAW.

LF: The education continues as a teacher because I’ve started teaching very young, when I was 27, at the Architectural Association. The AA was too expensive me to go so the cheapest way to go there was to be a teacher, and I learnt a lot. I’ve learnt from my students. Learning means that I always try to do something I’ve never done before. And the same I am doing here with MIAW: I try to convey the idea that the studies of architecture do not start the first day of the first year in university, as you have been experiencing architecture since you birth. As you said, it’s about observation and proposition: for example in my classes students are asked to use representation as a tool to gather they own learning both from their past and their present. Then there’s another class which is *Designing for*, in which we study the differences between the way architects describe their buildings and the way users perceive it. This is something also happening here, in Politecnico, where students might feel lost as points of references are missing, and so they had to create these spaces themselves.

EM: How to get a job at your office?

LF: Number 1, for MIAW students: you have to choose my workshop! I only give job to people who chose them (laughs). Number 2: I can tell how not to get in my office. Make sure you write the real name of the office, in order to avoid delivering a wrong “Dear Norman Foster”. Then, present yourself not saying what you can get from us, but what you can offer to us. So in the end: look for the advertisement in our website and write a proper letter: is that what everybody said?