Barcelona Dialogue: A Collaborative Project between Northeastern University, Boston and the AE-BKH

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Summary. The Collaborative Project “Barcelona Dialogue: Creativity, Innovation and Design” established between Northeastern University and the Barcelona Knowledge Hub of the Academia Europaea (AE-BKH) has offered students of 15 different disciplines, and of 11 different nationalities an introduction to contemporary achievements in design, the creative fields and the creativity economy in the Barcelona context. The first edition of the “Barcelona Dialogue” has taken place during the Summer of 2016 (July 4–July 24) in different locations of Barcelona, with lectures held in the site of the AE-BKH, at the impressive mid-17th century building of the Institute for Catalan Studies. [Contrib Sci 12(2):141-144 (2016)]

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A first edition of the Collaborative Project “Barcelona Dialogue: Creativity, Innovation and Design” has taken place during the Summer of 2016 (July 4–July 24) in different locations of Barcelona and in the unique spaces of the Barcelona Knowledge Hub of the Academia Europaea (AE-BKH) at the former Casa de Convalescència (Convalescence House) of the former Hospital of the Saint Cross (presently, the Library of Catalonia), which is the site of the Institute for Catalan Studies (Fig. 1). This Barcelona Dialogue has offered students of 15 different disciplines, and of 11 different nationalities an introduction to contemporary achievements in design, the creative fields and the creativity economy in

Trencadís ("broken tiles") by Antoni Gaudí
the Barcelona context. Additionally, the program benefitted from partnerships with the Mies van der Rohe Foundation and the Enric Miralles Foundation, both located in Barcelona (Fig. 2).

Northeastern University is an institution founded in 1898 in Boston, Massachusetts. In a city distinguished by its many and respected universities, Northeastern has differentiated itself from its very beginnings by its focus on experiential learning. This philosophy of higher education is based on the pedagogical premise that a complete education requires a diversity of experiences, some strictly academic within the boundaries of the traditional campus, together with other experiences of a diverse nature, ranging from professional practice, to community service, and institutional collaboration, all at a global scale. Experiential learning draws from the latent synergies between social progress, innovation and scholarly research. The “Barcelona Dialogue” has been conceived within this pedagogical framework.

Barcelona is a city that has strongly believed in the transformative power of design. As a 19th-century industrial center, Barcelona’s entrepreneurial class fostered a dramatic expansion of the existing city through Ildefons Cerdà’s (1815–1876) new Eixample (Expansion) section of the city, where a disruptive architecture emerged in the work of Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926), Lluís Domènech (1850–1923) i Muntaner (1850–1923) and Josep Puig i Cadafalch (1867–1953), to only mention some of the most recognized architects and designers. The city and its industrialist elite also supported an unprecedented and diverse creativity in many fields, ranging from graphic design to literature, from the visual arts to technology. Our students were introduced to these many faces of the city in its recent history, and also to the role that creativity plays today, an essential force behind this Mediterranean city’s culture, economy, and international projection. Creativity is also one of the essential forces driving forward modern societies.

Design Thinking, the central concept of this program, is a term coined by British designer Tim Brown in relation to his work at the consultancy IDEO, and also to his academic collaboration with Stanford University in California. At Stanford, Brown proposed that all undergraduate students take an introductory course on design methodology and strategy, an initiative that has been fully implemented. Design Thinking proposes a method of problem solving based on experimentation, interdisciplinary collaboration, iterative process, prototype-based exploration, and experience design.

Contemporary design has been rapidly changing the world we live in. From the spaces we inhabit to the clothes we wear, from sustainable environments to data visualization, design is reshaping the way we think, the processes of making, and the cultures of interacting with products and systems.

The seminar looked at the evolution of design and design thinking during the last few decades, with a focus on the present and immediate future of disruptive creativity. We studied how design methodologies translate into business models, into new forms of communication and problem solving with high emotional and intellectual impact. We have examined the work of designers that have successfully doubled as entrepreneurs in different fields, such as visual communication, fashion, product design, architectural...
innovation, gastronomy, or applied technology.

Topics of the seminar included the writings of Walter Benjamin on mechanical reproductivity; Nikolaus Pevsner on the pioneers of modern design and architecture; Sigfried Giedion’s research on the impact of industry and mechanization on designers, and Reyner Banham’s concept of design within a “second machine age.” Among recent contributions, we worked with the writings of Tim Brown on “design change”; Manuel Castells on the network society; William McDonough on sustainable design; Rem Koolhaas on “generic cities”, and Richard Florida on the rise of the creative class.

Dr. Suzanne Strum offered a seminar on Design Innovation that referred to several case studies, based on design-based companies, Dr. Kathrin Golda-Pongratz, a member of Academia Europaea and professor at the Frankfurt University of Technology, lectured on recent transformations of public spaces in the city of Barcelona, and Dr. Xavier Costa-Guix offered an introduction to the urban development and transformation of the city.

Students also worked on a creative project using photography and visual documentation. This studio was led by artist and photographer Diego Ferrari, a professor at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and a collaborator at Elisava School of Design and Engineering, a school which is ascribed to University Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. This photographic project was based on the German Pavilion designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for the Barcelona International Exhibition of 1929, and reconstructed in 1986. Students were able to develop preparatory work and final presentations in the spaces of the Enric Miralles Foundation, within the Miralles-Tagliabue (EMBT) architecture studio, in the historic center of the city.

The students also enjoyed different ludic and cultural
activities, one of the most remembered among them was the night concert of classic music at the cloisters of the Convalescence House (Casa de Convalecència), the site of the Institute for Catalan Studies, a Baroque palace built in mid-17th-century (Fig. 3).

Both academic and cultural activities of the Barcelona Dialogue Project of Northeastern University perfectly harmonized with the main interests of the AE-BKH that aims to the promotion of activities of interest for the scientific community of the region, with special emphasis on multidisciplinary scientific activities that include the perspective of the natural and social sciences and the humanities. The AE-BKH’s goal is to contribute to the consolidation of a genuine European area of innovation, research, and education, especially in the Mediterranean and southern Europe.

Competing interests. None declared.