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TRANSMISSION OF THE VERSUS METHOD TO ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS AND LECTURERS

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Eight years after their publication, it is interesting to look at the impact that the two *VerSus* books have had on architectural education. The authors of these publications, all architecture lecturers, unanimously agree that *VerSus* has spread far more widely than we could have imagined. Thanks to the publications, the *VerSus* wheel comes up easily in web search engines whenever students or teachers undertake research that seeks to weave links between vernacular architecture and contemporary design. Architecture courses incorporating *VerSus* analysis can be seen in a wide variety of contexts including outside Europe. Some teachers adopt the tool on their own, others call on one of the 5 initial project partners to explain how to proceed. Three main uses by students and their lecturers can be identified:

- contextual analysis prior to a design
- analysis of student projects
- analysis of contemporary projects.

Context analysis

In the case of context analysis, *VerSus* is used to understand places in their cultural landscape dimension. When teachers send their students to a municipality with remarkable vernacular architecture to collect data for the design of a sustainable project, *VerSus* proves very useful because it curbs in the students the prime instinct of architects which is to look for the aesthetic dimension of buildings. By using the *VerSus* grid, they go deeper into their analysis of the situation. On the environmental side, for example, in addition to being interested in the landscape integration of buildings, they will question the origin of the material resources as well as the relationship between the buildings and the climate. In this way, buildings that would not have attracted their attention because of their modest aesthetic qualities can turn out to be brilliant in bioclimatic terms. The same applies to the socio-economic and socio-cultural dimensions of the analysis grid, which forces the students to enter into the thinking of the craftspeople at the time in order to question their design logic. They thus seek to answer questions such as: "why did they settle in this place?", "why did they use such a material in such a place?", "what were the tools and forms of mutual aid mobilised for this construction?", "what were the trades of the time?", "with what type of maintenance have these constructions survived the centuries?", etc. If, in addition to conducting their study as simple outside observers, the students have the time to organise a presentation-debate with the inhabitants, they gain an even richer level of knowledge of the site. When

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**Students working on a *VerSus*
 analysis**
(credits: author)



↑ **Results of the VerSus analysis**
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explaining the 15 VerSus principles through examples to local people, the inhabitants in turn ask themselves questions and quickly describe what they have in their village that is comparable. At the end of the session, they sometimes invite the students into their homes or into parts of the village that had not been studied in order to discover new treasures.

Analysis of student projects

The VerSus tool can be used in a second step to help students in their design process. By designing with VerSus in mind, they are able to better channel their ideas and better structure the narrative that they will use to defend their project in front of lecturers. VerSus serves as a checklist for them to continually self-assess their progress and identify weaknesses in their proposals. They are thus able to separate what is

already successful from what still needs to be improved. The tool also forces them to consider dimensions that they would not necessarily have studied. On a technical level, they anticipate, for example, how their project will be built, used and maintained in the long term. If wood is the ideal material for this location because a local industry is already operational, they will talk to local craftspeople to find out which wood species they can work with on their machines, the size of their workshops, the power of their lifting equipment, etc. In this way, they ensure that they do not design elements that will need to be prefabricated elsewhere. Likewise, they avoid the stresses on the site and the extra costs that unrealistic designs would generate. On the human level, they also manage to develop relevant social interactions favouring conviviality, the transfer of knowledge or the possibility of shared uses. It is possible to achieve the same results without *VerSus*, yet in our opinion the 15 criteria grid facilitates the design process.

Keith and Marie Zawistowsky, a couple of teachers at the Grenoble School of Architecture, who supervise the design/buildLAB studio (www.designbuildlab.org), use the *VerSus* tool in the design phase of their projects. Their teaching is structured around the realisation of real projects which allows them to confront students with design and construction simultaneously. The architecture they produce with students emerge from an intimate understanding of people and places, and this has become their trademark. Using the *VerSus* tool, they encourage students to review their projects from different angles of observation, so that every opportunity to enrich the design is explored. *VerSus* has not changed their very human approach to architecture, but it does help them to better convey their ideas.

Analysis of contemporary projects

Another use that has been widely developed since the publication of *VerSus* is the analysis of contemporary projects. This use was already suggested at the end of the *VerSus* booklet published in 2014 with the analysis of 8 projects. However, these examples did not go into detail. As part of the teaching process, students are generally asked to work in small groups of 2 to 3 people so that their analysis can be debated by several people and the discussions within the group can help develop the students' critical thinking skills and their ability to construct an argument. When working alone, the participants certainly do think, but they do not go through this phase of confrontation of ideas with their peers, which seems to us to be essential. The analysis of contemporary projects can be done over half a day or a whole week. The more time the students have, the more detail they can go into. We therefore recommend devoting several days to this exercise. If they have a whole week, then they spend about 2 days reviewing the published literature on the selected project in order to complete the 15 criteria grid, separating the positive and negative inputs to each criterion. At the end of the two days, they can present a *VerSus* wheel marked red where the project is weak and green where it is very strong on sustainability. For each of the criteria, there is usually both red and green because perfect projects do not exist. From the third day onwards, armed with their detailed analysis of the project, they will try to make contact with the project's stakeholders: the owner, designers and builders in order to understand the project's development phases.



↑ and opposite page
House for all in Four, France
 Built in 2018 by students
 from the Grenoble School of
 Architecture as part of the
 design/buildLAB courses
 supervised by Keith and Marie
 Zawistowski
 (credits author)

They sometimes also interview users to ensure that the exceptional results touted in publications are indeed real, in terms of functionality or thermal comfort, for example. This exchange provides them with new insights, particularly on the challenges encountered during the construction phase or the problems encountered by the designers in gaining acceptance for unconventional materials and techniques. The remaining days of the week are used to finalise a 15 to 30-page dossier which they present to their classmates, giving them an additional opportunity to analyse an architecture on the basis of a structured argument.

The choice of projects is usually theirs. We recommend that they choose a project that they admire in terms of sustainable development. The conclusions of this exercise are often the same for the students. They appreciate being able to enter into the intimacy of a project that they seemed to know well and that turns out to be much more complex than they imagined. Their perspective changes completely between the beginning and the end of the exercise. By spending time investigating what they considered to be a model project, they discover not only the flaws but also new valuable elements, some of which they had missed.

VerSus can therefore be used in a variety of ways and at all stages of the architectural curriculum. Some students keep the grid to propose analyses in their Master's theses. What seems essential to us is to be able to inscribe this 15-criteria analysis grid in the minds of students so that they acquire the reflex of analysing architecture in a transversal way. Thinking in this way allows playing with the parameters in a careful way during the design phase and to avoid any gross distortion by developing one criterion too much to the detriment of the others. The grid also allows students to perceive intelligence everywhere, even in buildings that seem insignificant or even ugly at first glance.

However, it must continue to be made clear that *VerSus* is about extracting the intelligence that led to the creation of vernacular architecture and not simply duplicating those buildings that have lasted for centuries. Some of *VerSus*'s detractors may have complained that the tool seeks to regress architecture by forcing 21st century humans to live as they did in the Middle Ages. This is not the case, *VerSus* simply requires an understanding of the balances of the past in order to better measure the balances of today.

Furthermore, *VerSus* should not be used in place of other tools such as life cycle analysis grids or energy grids proposed by various construction labels in Europe. *VerSus* remains a qualitative, rather than a quantitative tool.



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