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LEARNING FROM DESIGNING FOR REFUGEES

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Abstract

In the last five years, Turkey experienced huge migration flux of refugees running from the Syrian Conflict. This flux created a problem of urgent inhabitation that Turkey had suffered many times before because of being on a problematic geography, not only politically but also seismically. In both cases, victims are under not only the pressure of physical problems such as having lost their homes but also moral ones like death of beloved ones. Moreover, refugee crisis has a dimension of identity problem, due to differences with host communities. In addition to other dramatic movements of population since the second half of 19th century, Anatolia also experienced many agonizing destructions of powerful earthquakes that left hundred thousands of people homeless in seconds. Whether because of an armed conflict or a natural disaster, urgent inhabitation of mass amount of people is a multifaceted problem one of which is absolutely architecture. Therefore, architecture students in Turkey have to learn how to deal with this issue.

Under these circumstances, the aim of this study is to convey the social and professional awareness level of students of architecture on humanitarian crises by questionnaires, especially in relation to the refugee crisis, and detect the pros and cons of undergrad education. The results are hoped to be helpful in order to get lessons to educate future generations of architects with social responsibility.

Keywords: Architectural Education; Social Responsibility; Professional Awareness; Design for Society.

1. Introduction

Vitruvius stated the three principles of architecture as *firmitas, utilitas, venustas*, which can be translated as durability, utility and beauty of architectural design. This triad also had been serving a clear objective for design education for centuries. While the profession is often problematized between aesthetical and technical issues in architecture schools; the student projects in studios mostly vacillate between plan and mass. Hence, students focusing on a stabilized structure and functional space organization in a fancy shell or mass, often miss the main concern: the empathy with the user which is important in terms of user satisfaction.

Although students prepare detailed architectural programming about space requirements, they often cannot understand the user needs. There's a difference between knowing something and understanding it. Knowing is comprehension; understanding is deeper because it comes from empathy (Pinola, 2014). Empathy is vital for architecture but not easy for students, especially with people who live far different lives than their selves such as disadvantaged groups like disabled, displaced or underprivileged. Therefore, Schmid (2001) defines empathy as “a social bridge [...] as an expression of personal quality of solidarity”.

2. Towards an Education for a Socially-Driven profession

In the past five years, Turkey has welcomed—or has tried to welcome—millions of refugees, which is not the first time for the country. Anatolia has been bearing witness large movements of people especially after Balkan Wars. In addition to dramatic movements of population, Anatolia also had to cope with agonizing destructions of powerful earthquakes that left hundred thousands of people homeless in seconds. Only in the 20th century eleven seismic movements more than magnitude 7.0 destroyed rural and urban areas, one of which was 1999 İzmit earthquake, destroyed three cities and killed more than 17.000 people (Er Akan, 2008).

Whether because of an armed conflict or a natural disaster, Turkey had to cope with planning and building problem of temporary and permanent inhabitation areas several times for people-in-need. Since the 19th century, many projects, from temporary settlements with social services such as food banks, schools, baths etc. to permanent single immigrant houses and model villages, were designed for inhabitation. Most of these projects were realized, but some remained as unbuilt (Örmeciöğlü, 2003).

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In spite of the huge practice of the country, every time a crisis occurs, architects act as if they face the problem for the first time. As these experiences have not been analyzed systematically and theorized that a professional sensitivity had not developed on the issue adequately. In fact, architecture has to become a socially driven profession in a world of inequalities, since space is a tool for changing everyday life. Empowering education for social change is important for future generations of architects. Nevertheless, it is believed that the ability of architecture students empathizing with disadvantaged people can be improved in studios with relevant social responsibilities, and more courses on the topic.

3. Method

The aim of this study is to make a comparison on the professional awareness and knowledge of students on refugee crises among architectural students in Turkey. A comparison will be made on the issue between the students who studied refugee crisis-related projects in design studios and courses with the ones who did not.

3.1. Participants

The questionnaires were applied online to enable students to respond freely and truthfully to each question. The assurance of anonymity was provided. Although the questionnaire was prepared for online answering for various students, limitation of the study was about advertising it. Hence, we had 132 valid participants, from seven different universities.

The rate of females among the participants is 60.9%, and, almost half of the participants (48.1%) are from families earning less than 3000 TL for a month. 60.9% of students are in their 4th or more term in architecture school. A quarter of the students (24.8%) declared that they studied refugee crisis in their courses while only 16.5% of them declared that they studied refugee crisis in design studio.

3.2. Questions

The questionnaire comprised twenty-nine questions, aimed at collecting the data on the examinees' socio-demographic characteristics, their knowledge and ideas on refugee crisis as individuals and as prospective professionals.

There are five groups of questions. In the first group, the following personal data was collected pertaining to each student: name of the university, sex, age, school term, place of residence, monthly income, hometown and parents' education level. The students were also asked if they studied the refugee problem at school and/or in studio in 2015-2016 fall and spring terms.

The first group of questions were followed with ones on the participant's knowledge on the problem. The questions evaluated the acquaintance about the concepts of refugee and immigrant. The third and fourth groups of questions were asked to understand the personal point of view of the participants on the refugee crisis whether they have a positive or negative attitude towards the issue. This part also had an open-ended question asking about the opinion of the participant on what the most important problem of refugees is. The last group of questions was asked to understand the participants' knowledge about architectural projects on the problem and their ideas on refugee crisis as a professional.

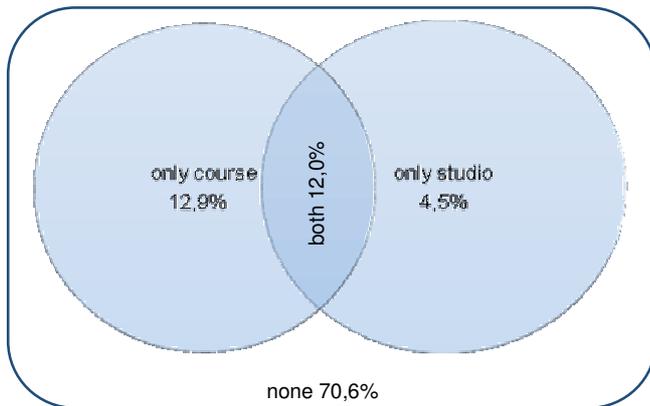
Except for the first part of multiple choice questions, the questionnaire was designed based on five-point likert-scale and the third group had an optional open-ended question to collect more detail about participants' ideas.

4. Results and Discussions

As this is a comparative study on the professional awareness and knowledge on refugee crises between the students who studied refugee crisis-related projects in design studios and/or courses with the ones who did not, these two groups were compared on a number of factors hypothesized to contribute to architectural education.

According to our study nearly a quarter of the participants (24,85%) declared that they took courses on refugee crisis while 16,5% of participants declared they studied refugee crisis in the studio. 12% of these students confirmed that they took both; however, majority of them (70,6%) took none (Table 1).

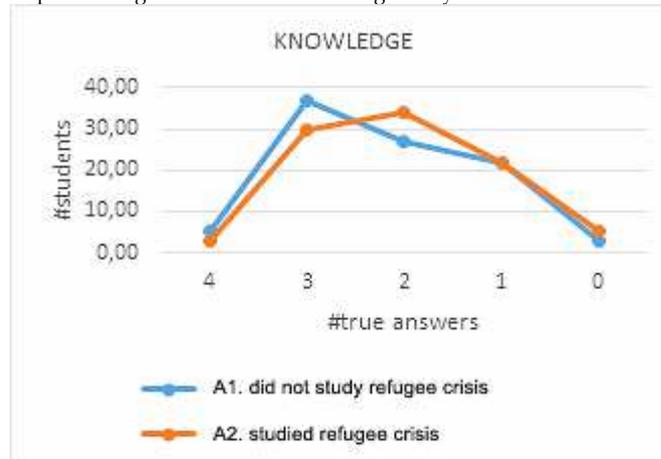
Table 1: Graph showing the Venn diagram of students who took courses related with refugee crises at school, students who studied refugee crisis in architectural design studio, who took both and who studied none. (Total 132 students)



In the second group of questions, we tried to find out the effects of taking courses/studios on the general and professional knowledge of participants about the refugee problem. The first four questions were for evaluating their general knowledge on reasons of being refugee and finding out whether there is a significant difference between the students who studied the topic in the studio and those who did not. At the end, it was observed that students of both groups were not sure about what the refugee is.

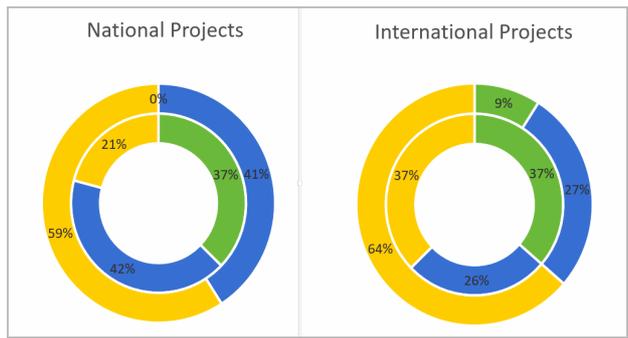
According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2016) *“a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence... Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries”*. However only 7,7 % of the students who took course or studio about refugee crisis answered correctly that refugee is not a person who left his or her country for economic reasons. These results conveyed that students have confusion on international definitions of refugee and immigrant (Table 2).

Table 2: Graph showing the rate of true answers given by students about what a refugee is.



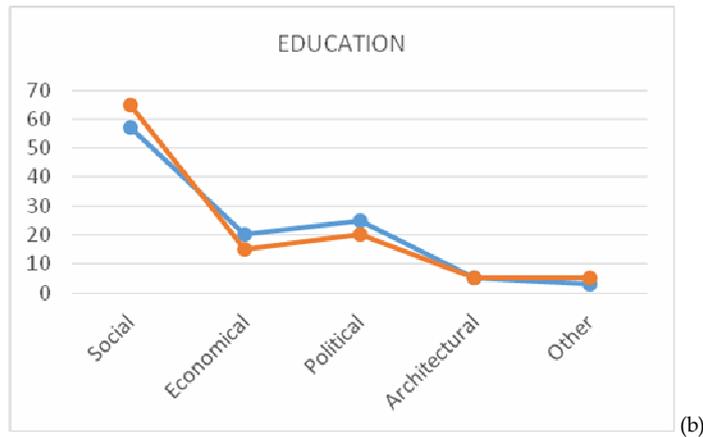
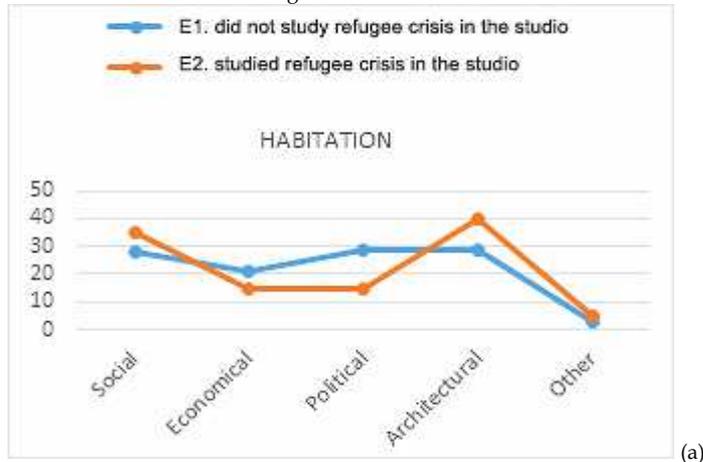
Unlike their general knowledge, students who studied the topic at school are better at professional knowledge. When we asked about their information on existing projects for the refugee problem, it was observed that students who studied the topic at the school are well up on the existing literature both on national and international projects (Table 3).

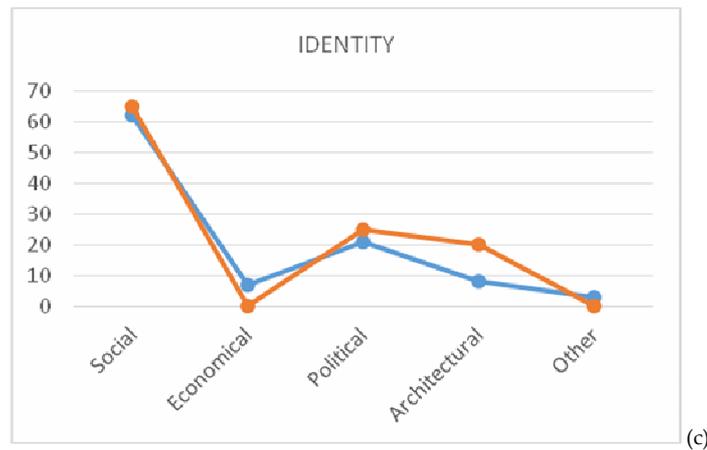
Table 3: The graphs are showing knowledge of students on national and international architectural projects about refugee settlements. Outer ring shows students who studied refugee crisis at school and inner ring shows those who did not. (Yellow: I know, blue: not decided, green: I don't know)



The third and fourth group of questions tried to evaluate the effect of taking courses/studios about refugee problem on the personal point of views of the students (Table 4).

Table 4a-b-c: The graphs show the rates students assign for the role of architecture in the solution of various problems. Yellow indicates students who studied refugee crisis in the studio and blue those who did not.





(c)

As we see in the table 4 a-b-c, the prevalence of the belief in architecture as a solution for the refugee problem differs according to whether a course and/or studio is taken by the participant. The ones who took a course or a design studio on refugee problems tended to rely on architecture as a solution more than the ones who did not. When we consider different aspects of the refugee problem, architecture is believed as a key solution to habitation problem for both groups. On the other hand, when we closely examine the results, we discovered that the ones who take a course or a design studio on the topic tend to rely on social solutions more than the ones who did not.

5. Conclusions

19th and 20th century industrialism and development ideals created a planet which is on the edge of its limited sources and natural balance. The climatic change, end of resources, and related global economic instability have caused hazardous results on humanity. Natural disasters and multinational wars have caused immense destructions on urban and rural areas; hence the world after the millennium, presents new challenges for every profession.

Under these new conditions, architects of the 21st century should know how to function at different extremes of the social spectrum from the top to the bottom of post-industrial society. Therefore, architecture schools should be much more related with social design and its related challenges.

The results of our study have conveyed that courses and studios did not effectively help improvement of general knowledge about refugee crisis; but visibly created a difference in professional knowledge. On the other hand, the study showed that the architecture students who experienced socially-motivated projects in studio, developed higher level of professional sensitivity and empathy for this humanitarian crisis.

Nevertheless, social design is a broad concept covering universal design, low-cost design, activist architecture, refugee settlements, participatory design, post-disaster housing etc.; however, the fact is that a studio can only address one of the problematic situations while the rest remains inexperienced. For this reason, social-minded architectural studios can stimulate change and make a difference on students' professional approach; however, the whole curriculum needs to be reevaluated in order to create social-minded future for the profession.

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