

Life is Serious; **ART SERENE**

Biography

Dragana Kojičić is an independent architect specialised in earth architecture at CRAterre (France) and a PhD student at Scene architecture in Novi Sad. She organises workshops, festivals and other events that promote the use of earth in architecture and beyond for various target groups in Serbia and in the region. She is a certified ECVET trainer and a president of KFZ, an umbrella organisation for ECVET Earth Building in Serbia. She is a co-founder of itinerant Regio Earth festival between Serbia, Hungary and Romania and a founder of LALA Earthland local festival.

EARTH AS AN ANDRAGOGICAL TOOL FOR CREATING SPACES AND EVENTS

Dragana Kojičić

Independent architect, Serbia, dramarchin@gmail.com

Abstract

I have been organizing and leading earth-building workshops for 15 years. The initial goal was to remind people of this wonderful architectural heritage that should be protected as well as to try to reintroduce earth as a modern material.

However, what I have noticed happening during the workshops goes beyond just the technical aspect of building with earth. I often witness the transformation of people who, at first, are very hesitant to get dirty, but then, with complete enjoyment, continue to work and build.

In recent years, I have used earth as a tool for working with various communities for all kinds of creative experiments – from more intimate events in the village of Mošorin, through open workshops in the Almaš quarter in Novi Sad, to numerous events in many other places in Serbia and abroad – earth brings both some universal interpretations and some very specific ones for certain people, communities, and spaces.

The serenity of working with the simplest material leads to a transformation that we witness on both an individual and collective level, proving that art can have a much greater and more profound impact than we can even imagine on our seemingly serious lives.

Keywords: earth, meanings, events, people, workshops

1. INTRODUCTION

I have been organizing and leading workshops for building with (raw) earth for past 15 years. The initial goal was to remind people how houses used to be built and maintained in Serbia, to protect part of this wonderful architectural heritage, and to reintroduce earth as a modern material, even if only in small amounts or in specific aspects of construction (finishes, decorative plasters, stoves, etc.).

In recent years, I used earth as a tool for establishing contact and working with various communities. It provides an excellent platform for all kinds of creative experiments – through various workshops and more intimate events in the village of Mošorin, open workshops and exhibitions in the Almaš quarter in Novi Sad, numerous events in many other places in Serbia and the region, to the residencies abroad – earth brings both some universal interpretations and some very specific ones for certain people, communities, and spaces.

What does work with the earth brings to people? Can the earth be a tool in community work, can it contribute to its improvement, etc.?

2. METHODOLOGIES

I never thought of the way I work as a methodology. And it wasn't just one approach, but many attempts to find a way to function and live from what I do and what inspires me.

Certainly, my work relies on the CRATERRE methodology. Craterre is an international centre for earth construction at the National School of Architecture in Grenoble, France, where I completed a two-year Post-Master DSA Terre program from 2008 to 2010. To a large extent, everything I do is based on what I learned there – from a very concrete scientifically supported approach, through the practical experiences to a breadth that allows me to understand the similarities and differences between techniques, the specifics, and variations each place has. Based on the areas we studied, I created an online course that I teach every winter, but I also use the knowledge gained as a foundation for the workshops I conduct.

A major discovery for me while writing this paper was also that my methods are not pedagogical, as I mainly work with adults, and the methods are therefore – andragogical (Leš & Fabijanić, 2011). What I have noticed, in contrast to working in formal educational settings, are certain “advantages” I have: I work with motivated individuals with diverse life experiences who are eager to learn, and aim to solve a specific problem through that learning (restore an old house, build a new one, etc.).

Also, I work in non-formal education, which lies between formal and informal: it happens out of school, it's usually supportive, structured and usually prearranged. It's voluntary, may be guide- or teacher-led and learning is usually not evaluated and typically non-sequential. It's conscious and holistic, role of the group is very important and its valuing mistakes – earth as a material is an excellent tool for it, as every mistake can be easily corrected, and a lot is learned from it.

Nevertheless, into part of our non-formal training we have introduced ECVET. ECVET is European credit system for vocational education and training, one of EU instruments that help individuals to transfer, recognize and accumulate their outcomes and to obtain a qualification, very often through transnational mobility.

ECVET Earth building¹ is a matrix of units of learning outcomes that are conceived for construction, renovation and decoration with (raw) earth, developed over 15 years of cooperation between 14 countries. Each of the 9 units is divided into knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to carry out these activities and each has criteria and indicators for the evaluation (Didier, Paccoud et al. 2016).

Women are more and more interested in natural building, they represent 70-80 % of participants in most of the workshops we organize. Some people say: because women were the first to engage in gardening, women and earth give birth, women take care of the house in every possible sense and / or because they are more open to “alternative” techniques. According to some opinions, the first houses were built by women, because they are the ones who stay behind. Some people even say that there are so many women in this field as long

¹ <https://ecvetearth.hypotheses.org/>, Retrieved on 10.10.2024.

as it's not profitable, but once it's about profit, men take it over. ²

Working with earth involves a lot of experimentation, as each type of earth is different. Through many trials and errors, very spontaneously, we developed different workshop formats in the village of Mošorin: from volunteer, one-day, weekend thematic workshops, to mORA - summer school, summer camps, and the aforementioned ECVET training.



Fig. 1. Women making an adobe wall during Regio Earth Festival in Mošorin 2019. Photo credits: Flori Achim & Cosmin Neagu

Alongside these workshops in a familiar setting, different formats began to develop outside Mošorin: from short workshops in collaboration with local and regional institutions, to multi-day workshops with individuals and organizations - which always mean working in a new context, with different materials, tools, and people.

And always with the goal: to demolish or build a wall, floor, plaster.

But since 2018, through my PhD in Scene Design³ at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad, I have started exploring whether and how earth can be used beyond architecture, in other arts. At the same time, I began exploring new ways and connecting with other professionals, artists, doing other formats: conferences, festivals (regional and local), and artistic residencies abroad.

All of this has led me to realize that earth is an exceptional tool for working with individuals and communities, for creating spaces and events.

3. MEANINGS OF EARTH

Earth has universal, local, and some very personal meanings.

² <https://madeoutofmud.earth/women-in-natural-building/>, Retrieved on 11.10.2024.

³ <https://scen.uns.ac.rs/studijски-programi/doktorske-studije/>, Retrieved on 11.10.2024.

Earth is unique in our universe, yet it is so ordinary that it is taken for granted. However, the fact is that humans have always been connected to the earth for many reasons and in many ways. Some of the universal meanings of earth are: it is a planet, a homeland, and a home, a protector and nurturer, a substance and material, a medicine and neutralizer, a mediator and substitute for humans, an inspiration and creation. On it, our ancestors grew plants and animals, made houses, furniture, jewellery, paints... and, in the end, returned to it.

One of the universal meanings of earth is the origin of humanity, creation of humans from earth, or clay. This is a theme that appears in numerous myths and legends: from Greek, Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, and Hindu traditions, to African, Native American, Norse, Aboriginal, and Māori tribes. Almost all of them create humans from clay (yellow in China, red in America), adding water (Prometheus), or blood (the Sumerian god Enki), and some of the first humans were created by drying clay in the sun.

Viewed from a layperson's perspective, humans made of clay create various things, just as God created man; also, earth is associated with fertility, and fertility with creation.

However, from a scientific perspective, there are other, even more fascinating explanations – clay has three unique properties: first, it can be deformed without cracking; second, when the deforming force stops, the shape remains unchanged; and third, when it dries, it has significant strength. Moreover, the molecular structure of clay consists of hexagonal crystals, and it seems that this very structure could be key to the origin of life, a springboard for organic evolution (Kloprogge, Hartman, 2022).

Each of these universal meanings also has its many local variations.

“It is said that almost every person – in our country – has a black grain on their navel that seems to be made of earth. The people believe that God created man from earth and that these grains are traces of the earth from which the first human was created” (Mijatović, 1956).

In folk traditions, man is often identified with the earth, and the earth changes him in many rituals – it is offered when someone has been ill for a long time in order to “ransom” them from death (by filling and throwing a sock with earth).

The earth is also used as a neutralizer: it absorbs rain, neutralizes the strike of lightning and thunder; it is worn as an amulet against curses, the evil eye, and illness... In principle, it was believed that “a child's first touch should be with the earth because it nourishes them” (Đapović, 1995).

The earth also appears as an intermediary between higher powers and humans, as a neutralizer of sins, but also of wrongdoings committed during life. It is also believed that throwing clods of earth during a funeral, along with the words “may the earth rest lightly on him”, is a ritual in which the living “settle accounts’ with the deceased.”

Or a common sentence in our language: “You’ll make me out of mud!” in the sense of: you will realize my value when I’m no longer here.

Finally, the earth also has many personal meanings: it almost always brings back memories of childhood, carefreeness, playfulness and sense of freedom.

For me, as for most of the people I worked with in last 15 years:

“Mud is contagious – it is love at first touch” (Gerretsen, 2022).

4. CREATING SPACES AND COMMUNITIES

4.1 In Mošorin

Through various workshops in Mošorin, we created different spaces (interior of the house, workshop space, classroom, toilet blocks, kids house, chicken house etc.) and we worked with many different groups: groups of pupils of technical schools, students of architecture, architects, scouts, volunteers, but mostly - spontaneously created groups of participants.



Fig. 2. Preparatio of eart during Regio Earth Festival in Mošorin 2019. Photo credits: Flori Achim & Cosmin Neagu

Most of them are tired of being in artificial spaces, confined for hours in offices in front of computers. Everyone enjoys being outdoors and, surrounded by earth and other natural materials; people feel warm, safe and secure.

It has also been proven that working with earth makes people happier, due to the bacteria found in the soil (Francis, 2010).

They relax while working with the earth (no matter how hard the work may sometimes be, such as when preparing large quantities of material or building a wall), and quickly connect with each other. They usually continue to socialize or work together even after the workshops are finished. Gathering, working and creating together is especially important to women and that can be one of the reasons why we have so many of them attending our workshops.

Also, in today's highly specialized world, people are delighted by the realization that they are capable of making something with their own hands, especially the fact that they are able to create a home for themselves, including their kids and their friends in that process.

Furthermore, by inviting other artists to conduct their creative experiments in Mošorin ("4 essays on the space of community"⁴ by Tatjana Babić and Jelena Janev for example), we all get surprised and amazed by the possibilities of completely transforming our common and well-known space with such small effects (lights, installations, etc.).

4 <https://sites.google.com/view/mikrokosmosinterakcija/home?authuser=5>



Fig. 3. Togetherness and creation during Regio Earth Festival in Mošorin 2019. Photo credits: Flori Achim & Cosmin Neagu

4.2 Outside of Mošorin

Through years of organizing events in the Almaš quarter of Novi Sad, I realized that it is very important, regardless of the weather, to hold them outdoors, because they become more visible, more people can join or just be aware of the fact that something is going on in their neighbourhood.

Another lesson from it is that building a community is a process, it takes time for people to become accustomed to events and to attend them.

I've also learned that we don't always have to plan everything – it's enough to provide the framework for the workshop and a general idea, but give participants enough freedom to express themselves, because very often the best solutions come out of that.

During my artistic residencies in Western Europe, I realized that sometimes it is not easy to find basic materials, such as earth, due to various regulations, and that we have to look for it in recycling centers around, as it was in Innsbruck. On the other hand, I got inspired very much by the exhibition of the Architekturzentrum Wien "Land for all: self-interest or common good?!"⁵ and included it into my final exhibition.

Through the artistic residency through Air on the Edge⁶ project on Inisheer island (Aran Islands, Ireland), I learned that earth doesn't always have to come from the decomposition of rocks (as we were taught at Craterre), but also from decades of mixing seaweed and sand by local people. There, I met children who, for the first time, had earth in their hands – for them, it was only used by their grandparents for growing potatoes.

Working with other artists in interdisciplinary teams (e.g. for the play *Pradevojčica* at the National Theatre

5 <https://aut.cc/ausstellungen/boden-fuer-alle#&gid=1&pid=1>

6 <https://www.airontheedge.com/>

Toša Jovanović from Zrenjanin, or with artists at the Art-nature LAB, creating an installation within the Craft Natur Museum in Ringkøbing), I realized how important is to learn from each other, inspire each other, open new possibilities, and work with (natural) materials we've never used before.

For me, it is also important that there is no trash, meaning that the vast majority of things we do can be recycled or just simply brought back to nature.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In a world dominated by technology, where almost no product is natural anymore, but instead undergoes various transformations, people lose their physical connection with nature, with the basic materials, and ultimately – with themselves and their community.

On the other hand, working with earth bring the sense of togetherness, the ability to create with our own hands something meaningful, beautiful and/or useful.

Through the ongoing amàRéno project, led by researchers at amàco research center in Lyon, preliminary conclusions for training practices are structured around four objectives:

- Highlight the magic of the earth material and the sense of wonder it can evoke,
- Establish a “choreography and scenography” based on always unique uses of space, time, tools, and materials,
- Invite interdisciplinarity (sciences, techniques, arts, and architecture) into each of the proposed situations
- Connect the shared concepts with the personal, sensory experiences of the participants in the proposed situations.

It is very important, for us who create such events to think in advance and prepare them according to those objectives, but also for the audience to get as much as they can from attending them.

The serenity while working with the simplest material leads to a transformation that we witness on both an individual and collective level, moving simultaneously on a spatial level (from infinitely small to infinitely large particles) and a temporal level (human and geological time) (Anger, 2005), proving that art can have a much greater and more profound impact than we can even imagine on our serious lives.

REFERENCES

- [1] Amàco (2023). AmàRéno - Rénover en matériaux bio-géo-sourcés : vers la montée en compétences massive des professionnel-le-s du bâtiment. Retrieved from <https://amaco.org/amareno-renovation-bio-geo-source-vers-la-montee-en-competences-massive-des-professionnels-du-batiment/>, 18.10.2024.
- [2] Anger, R. (2005). Grains de bâtisseurs : la matière en grains, de la géologie à l'architecture. *Architecture, aménagement de l'espace*. Retrieved from https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-02904034v1/file/7526_Anger_Grains_de_batisseurs.pdf 25.9.2024, 12.11.2024.
- [3] Didier, L., Paccoud, G., Kojičić, D., Faria, P., Aupicon, M. (2016). Le référentiel de compétences pour enseigner la terre, *Terra 2016* (pp.345-349). Craterre.
- [4] Đapović, L. (1995). Zemlja – verovanja i rituali. *Etnografski institut SANU*.
- [5] Francis, R. (2020). *Why Gardening Makes You Happy and Cures Depression*. Retrieved from <https://permaculture.com.au/why-gardening-makes-you-happy-and-cures-depression/>, 10.11.2024.
- [6] Gerretsen, I. (2022). *The ancient material that cools homes*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220705-the-sustainable-cities-made-from-mud>, 10.10.2024.
- [7] Klopogge, J.T, & Hartman, H. (2022). CLAYS AND THE ORIGIN OF LIFE: THE EXPERIMENTS. *Life*, 12(2), 259; Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3390/life12020259>, 20.10.2024.
- [8] Leš, Đ., & Fabijanić, N. (2011). ANDRAGOGIJA VS. PEDAGOGIJA. *Andragoški glasnik : Glasilo Hrvatskog andragoškog društva*, Vol. 15 No. 2. (27) 1/2, 1. Retrieved from <https://hrcak.srce.hr/104270>, 28.10.2024.
- [9] Mijatović, S. (1956). Narodna medicina Srba seljaka u Levču i Temniću. *Etnografske zabeleške iz Levča, Temniča, Belice i Resave, GEM* 19, 178.