

# PERFORMING OBJECTS AND INTERPRETIVE TECHNIQUES: TEXTUAL REWRITING AND OTHER METHODS TO RAISE A SET OF LANDSCAPE DESIGNS FOR A RURAL COMMUNITY

**José Carrasco Hortal<sup>1</sup>, Sara Prieto García-Cañedo<sup>2</sup>, José Antonio Sánchez Fajardo<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>University of Alicante

Department of Graphic Methods, Theory and Design

jose.carrasco@ua.es

<sup>2</sup>University of Alicante

Department of English Philology

## ESSAY 102/06

COLLABORATIVE REWRITING  
INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES  
METAPHOR-BASED OBJECTS  
PANDEMIC TIMES  
SPATIAL IMAGINATION

Based on the concept of 'interpretive community', it is possible to trace how humans can become interpreters (or decoders) of their own reality through, say, written excerpts and architectural works. This chapter is intended, therefore, to report on an interpretive-community workshop where students of three different disciplines (namely, Architecture, Sociology and English Studies) were assigned specific chapters of literary works with the goal of

making a collective interpretation through a process of rewriting and restoring architecture. These projects allow students (or any participant, in fact) in their recognition of salient concepts that are not necessarily ascribed to a specific domain; for instance, the understanding of architecture not solely as a construction process, but as a mechanism intended to protect traces of life that are naturally perceived through narration and the use of metaphors.

## INTRODUCTION

Spatial imagination constitutes the ability to predict possible worlds: it is used in literature to describe new universes, in environmental sciences to foresee the weather, and in architecture, as a chance to change surrounding spaces (Havik, 2014, p. 24). As a result, there are various academic disciplines that work together towards the inclusion of this permeable creativity. One way of looking at the interconnection of literary works and architecture is by examining the backdrops of stories depicting societies in crisis and the effect of metaphors on the elaboration of restoring architectures. This might constitute, in actual fact, one of the fundamentals of the oft-termed ‘interpretive community’ (Fish, 1980), which explains “how diverse readers consistently produce similar readings of certain types of texts” (Buchanan, 2010). Stated differently, readers, particularly in pandemic times, become interpreters of their own reality and their interpretive codes can be readily expressed through both the rewriting of long-standing passages and the transformation of their surroundings in the form of architectural works.

Thus, this paper revolves around the aspects of health-care, nurture and nature. It examines arguments that are extracted from a series of literary works that are set in pandemic times or voluntary confinement. The objective of this paper is to report on an interpretive-community workshop where students of three different disciplines (namely Architecture, Sociology and English Studies) were assigned specific chapters of literary works with the goal of making a collective interpretation through a process of rewriting and restoring architecture. In this framework, literature can be particularly prolific in the use of metaphors that connect the different readers’ subjectivities, providing semiotic dimensions when confronted with excessively scientific texts and problems (Pint, 2020).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### **Interpretive communities and rewriting: What for?**

The interconnection between science, literature and architecture is established through a perceptive-cultural construction (Ellingsen, 2007). What is read is no longer abstract. Thus, reading and rewriting turn into an effective exercise of embracing one's reality and expressing it through visual and literary resources. The interconnection between the concept of interpretive community and the process of rewriting lies, no doubt, in the social interpretation of the same stimuli. When readers decode the fundamentals of a narrative, their individual interpretation of the primal functions of the text moves from individuality (or personal subjectivity) to communality (or group subjectivity). This is, in fact, the gist of this study: showing how interdisciplinary tasks or practices can raise awareness on both the overarching influence of one's perception of reality in the reading process and the benefits of communality in the materialization of in-group interpretations.

From a cognitive point of view, establishing interpretive communities while reading allows for the reinforcement of personal self-awareness towards his/her community, since "one's self image as a reader is the place to begin establishing the image of others as readers" (Gilmore, 1984, p. 6). The realization of such self-image functionally demarcates the predisposition of readers/interpreters to embrace the attitudes and interpretations of others. In other words, it constitutes a necessary journey to oneself. Socially speaking, these practices of interpretive communities (through the process of rewriting classic excerpts) also involve the reconciliation of an individual with his/her community as, "[t]he differentness of an individual somehow sets him apart from the community; the community isolates him or in some other way repudiates that individual" (McFarland, 1992, p. 553).

These cognitive and social functions are not intended to abridge the expression of one's individuality, but rather to enhance the realization (of social individuals) as active participants in the construction and understanding of their community. University students, being subject to degree overspecialization, are generally detached from their natural role in an interdisciplinary community. We believe, as shown by the case studies presented in this project, that interpretive communities can facilitate this transition from 'and now what?' into 'now I know'. This is, to our knowledge, one the (many) values of interpretive communities.

### **Images and metaphors: At the interface of object design**

In architecture, the concept of image can be understood as the visual representation of an event, space or matter, which can be real or imagined, probable or unlikely, previous or evoked. It can also contain imprints of evolution, aging or growth (similar to tree rings), or it can be interpreted as promise, which projects a future (Calduch, 2016). In topology, space is both the dimension, extension, materiality, configuration (Perec, 2001) and the temporal framework where relationships occur.

On the other hand, metaphor refers to a transfer of meaning between two realities, entities, spaces (Van Cleempoel, 2020), which implies a disassociation from the frameworks where these two references are located. In design anthropology, this helps explain the fact that imagination is the ability to "consciously disconnect from known experience and produce symbolic images or representations" (Ingold, 2000, p. 111).

Spatial imagination might be defined, therefore, as the capacity to evoke images by transferring meanings between realities –using metaphors–, through writing (in literature), drawings and models (in architecture) or audiovisuals (in other artistic practices). And, as far as this project is concerned, it is useful to be able to establish links between concepts such as a word and an image, a phrase and a scene, a chapter and a sequence (Mejía, 2020) when

comparing the world of written communication and that of audiovisual production.

## METHODOLOGY

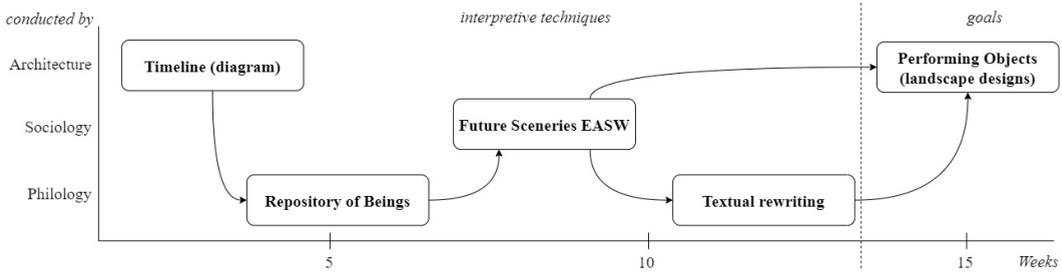
As part of the interdisciplinary premise of the project, three groups of undergraduate students have participated in the workshop: English Studies, Sociology and Architecture. It was supervised by *Viceversos*, a teaching-research group based in the University of Alicante (Spain), which implements interdisciplinary practices on yearly basis, conceived as a laboratory of teaching experiences that is intended to explore the intersection of university syllabuses.

The literary works used in the workshop come from two series of stories:

1. The first one set during the most tragic periods of an acute epidemic, e.g. *The Plague* (Camus, 1947/2018), *Love in Times of Cholera* (García Márquez, 1985/2014), *One of Ours* (Cather, 1922/2014), *A Journal of the Plague Year* (De-foe, 1722/2020), *The Scarlet Plague* (London, 1912), *The Masque of the Red Death* (Poe, 1842) or *Blindness* (Sara-mago, 1995/2019);
2. The second, on the other hand, in the lives of characters disconnected from society by their own choice, e.g. *Walden* (Thoreau, 1854/2014), *Il Barone Rampante* (Calvino, 1957/1980); or retired in a community of narrators, *Decameron* (Boccaccio, 1353/2020); or confined to recover from chronic ailment, *The Magic Mountain* (Mann, 1924/2020); or migrating in the face of an apocalyptic plague, *The Last Man* (Shelley, 1826/2020).

Only three case studies are shown here (see section 4) due to length constraints.

The workshop is based on a set of creative exercises encompassing the aspects of spatial imagination, interdisciplinary collaboration and metalanguage through four main practical sessions: (a) timeline, (b) repository of beings,



**Fig. 1** Jose Carrasco, 2021, contributions that come from each discipline.

(c) future sceneries, (d) rewriting. The assignment of case studies is done through fragments in a blind list, that is, where the author and title are unknown. list, i.e., where the author and title are unknown (Figure 1).

The first activity allows us to order literary excerpts on the basis of practical matters. It is called ‘timeline’ and is proposed from an architectural perspective. It serves as a first x-ray of the written document that is used as a starting point and uses the *Timetoast* application to order, collaboratively within each team, the text excerpts that may contain issues of interest in categories, equating the time variable to the page number. The categories are, for instance, language within language or how the non-human expresses as if it were, or the relationship between custom and seasonality.

The second activity is called ‘repository of beings’ and is proposed from a linguistic perspective. It refers to hybrid case studies that are related to how humans are organized before surges of severe or contagious diseases. It attempts to combine reading cases (those of the first activity) hybridizing situations of acute and contagious disease with another that refers to the expertise of individuals in their tasks, who are isolated from society or of human groups that organize themselves collectively in the face of a health crisis.

The third activity is called ‘future sceneries’ and is proposed from a sociological perspective. It explores the proposals of design based on the parameters of probability or social impact that are represented on a diagram. This is a tool inherent to the field of participatory planning. Finally, the fourth activity follows the process of rewriting and

once again, it stems from a linguistic angle. It is essentially inspired by Kristeva's theories on intertextuality (1980), and the resulting fragments are used by a narrator to describe the implementation of the design into the hypothetical dwelling of a new individual and a new reality. Each of the four activities leads to a rotation in teacher leadership, and students from all three disciplines are meant to collaborate in all activities, with the limitations of diverse backgrounds.

At the beginning of October 2020, the group of students went to the Sella valley (Marina Baixa), to an area surrounded by terraces between which runs a stream of water, sometimes underground, sometimes apparently still. During the field-work days, they could see that, thanks to the work of forest rangers and the dynamic action of the river itself, the paths were changing sides in the riverbed. Each team chose a location along the trail. After those days, the COVID-19 situation forced the work sessions to be online with lessons and practices in dual mode, since only the students of the Degree in Architecture could remain in the classroom, using the *Google Meet* tool to form twenty simultaneous conversation groups. A second modality used was a face-to-face attendance scattered along a kilometer of river path, without online coverage and with the teachers in itinerant mode.

The final performance (January 2021) showed a mix of outdoor fair of artifacts and an encyclopedia of displayed stories, revealing how students struggle to overcome the present-day COVID-19 crisis, convinced that "to live in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it" (Arendt, 1998, cited in Teerds, 2020, p. 23).

The rewritten text of the original literature is the guiding thread to show the meaning of artifacts, the performing objects, made halfway between the digital and the analogical, and that, on a material and spatial level, explore various conditions:

1. With the help of ropes and counterweights, the artifact floats in relation to the natural elements that surround

- it, in search of a weightlessness with a minimal footprint dispersed along a kilometer of path;
2. It looks for unique spaces established as natural thresholds, among dry stone walls, fruit trees, monumental trees, reed beds, trails and rocks bathed by the river;
  3. It prioritizes a haptic dimension, not a visual one, e.g. honey or perfume being smelled, water being redirected, sugar in a gravity clock, incense being sprinkled;
  4. A form of empathy is sought between artifact and human, what in science is called transduction (Ingold, 2013) and in philosophy is called resonance (Rosa, 2020), the same thing that occurs when a hand tenses the arrow against the string of a bow, presses the bow of a cello against the strings, or steers the kite with changes in tension in the string that holds it.

## THE CASE STUDIES

The collaboration among the undergraduate students has led to two important results:

- Objects that were conceived to synchronize with the strategic venue of a riverscape (Sella, Spain);
1. Paraphrased stories that were extracted from the original literary works. We will demonstrate this with a series
  2. of case studies (see sections *Case study 1: Italo Calvino's Il Barone Rampante*; *Case study 2: Gabriel García Márquez's Love in Times of Cholera* and *Case study 3: Albert Camus's The Plague*).

### **Case study 1: Italo Calvino's *Il Barone Rampante*, 1957/1980**

The story constitutes a literary parable that shows how, as opposed to Rousseau's *Noble Savage*, the aristocrat Cosimo is accepted by his community in spite of living up in the trees. Cosimo's life is far from comfort and double standards, and it is also uncanny with respect to the archetypes of his time and surroundings: the region of Liguria (Italy) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centu-

ries. It is also an initiatory novel for the teenager who is in need of examples of rebelliousness, imagination and nonconformity. However, Cosimo does not wish to fully detach from society, and from this place he intends to partake in common-interest endeavors to keep wild animals away or to be in touch with intellectuals.

*Landscape project:* Cosimo is embodied in some children that play in a school's playground which is intertwined with the surrounding nature, among poplar trees and a natural bridge made of fallen trees by the river, located a few orchards away from where Sella's Primary School is located.

*Social and restoring function:* the natural place where the school stands is also the place where the children are in charge of collecting honey that is made by bees which pollinate flowers that grow in the trees in the nearby terraces.

*Manufactured component:* a honeycomb is the core of a wooden, bag-sized structure with a lower container that collects the honey drops (Figure 2). The serialization of this object needs specialized cabins for honey collection and storage. The place where the piece stands is used as a visual, scented and gustatory passage of the valley, as well as a feast for birds and river bugs when honey drips out.

*Rewriting of a fragment of the book:* it is narrated in third person, and it keeps original metaphors such as "the underneath wind moved a wave in him, through the dense foliage, with changing tones of green" (Calvino, 1957/1980, p. 27). The new version also replaces trades such as a tree-climber for the hunter (keeping a wish to love life without knowing how to express it), or living creatures such as the flying insect *Taraxacum officinale* for pollinating bees. An interesting fact is that the little bird mentioned in the fragment, the treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* (which skillfully hides in the broken trunks of the tree) is not replaced, since its skill connects with the feelings of the new protagonists, the children, who are enthusiastic over mysteries and hideouts (by student Ana Riera, 2020).

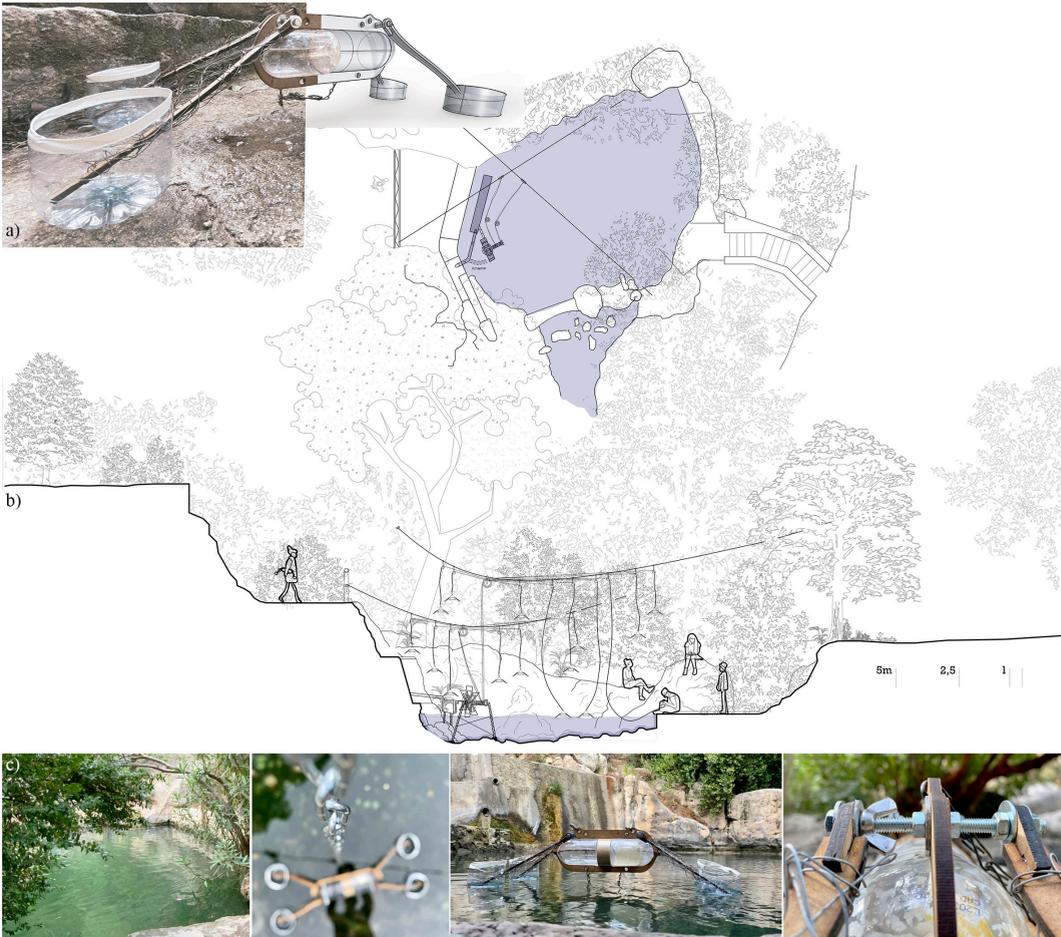


**Fig. 2** Italo Calvino's *Il Barone Rampante* (1957/1980, case study 1). Object's design (a); valley's project (b); operational demonstration (c) (by student Riera, A. 2020).

### **Case study 2: Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in Times of Cholera* ('Christmas night', pp. 191-234)**

The excerpt used in the workshop is in the middle of the novel, which starts out in times when doctor Juvenal Urbino is still waiting for Fermina Daza's reply on his love proposal. Various forms of communication are described: the portrait of his cousin at the Belgian photographer's studio at the Portal de los Escribanos; the letter authorizing Juvenal to talk to her father; the job offer to work as a telegrapher that would take Florentino Ariza to Villa de Leyva, once he finds out about Fermina being engaged with the doctor.

*Landscape project:* a natural dispenser at the birth of the river down the valley, where a natural dam is made, and the first ditch originates. The dispenser becomes an equipped space where visitors keep their last wills or get to know the written memoirs of the deceased. An hourglass system works like a water clock, a metaphor of life, and it controls how the capsules are raised and approached at the edge of the dam to be able to read and write messages (Figure 3).



**Fig. 3** Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in Times of Cholera* (1985/2014, case study 2). Object's design (a); valley's project (b); operational demonstration (c) (by student Martínez, O. 2020).

*Social and restoring function:* this part works as a funeral ceremony and a meeting point where relatives get together by the water dispenser. Besides, it works as a means of communicating with the absent and the deceased, as happens with Florentino Ariza, who:

At times his solace was the certainty that during the intoxication of her wedding celebration, even during the feverish night of her honeymoon, Fermina Daza would suffer one moment, one at least but one in one event, when the phantom of the sweetheart she had scorned, humiliated, and insulted would appear in her

thoughts, and all her happiness would be destroyed (García Márquez, 1985/2014, p. 210, translated by Edith Grossman).

In this place of Sella's valley, visitors write messages, which is a kind of emotional relief, as happens so many times in the novel by García Márquez.

*Manufactured component:* various capsules that end up floating on the surface and resembling the river bugs that are all over the river. The capsules float on plastic bottles and their wooden structure keeps all parts joint (by student Óscar Martínez, 2020).

### **Case study 3: Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947/2018, pp. 47-75)**

The original story talks firstly about the actions that became common practices due to the plague and about the time when the plague was taking place. It is the beginning of the epidemic time, so the people from Oran discover spaces where they are seemingly safe, like religious buildings or open-door spaces and new forms of communication, like a new journal that deals exclusively with the plague's crisis.

*Landscape project:* It is the area of Sella's valley that becomes technified so that the space becomes adequate for story-telling activities; the space where a small stage is located and some spotlights are installed to benefit from the moon light in summer nights. Twilight is the chosen moment in the drawing, when one artifact announces that the play *La piel del agua* is about to start (Figure 4). Please, take a seat.

*Social and restoring function:* the selected chapter mentions a doctor's capacity to relate a deceased person's vision, the idea of pain and the discouragement for the fate that the plague that is about to devastate the city entails. There is a specific quotation on the concept of the unforeseeable, as compared to the unavailable (Rosa, 2020).

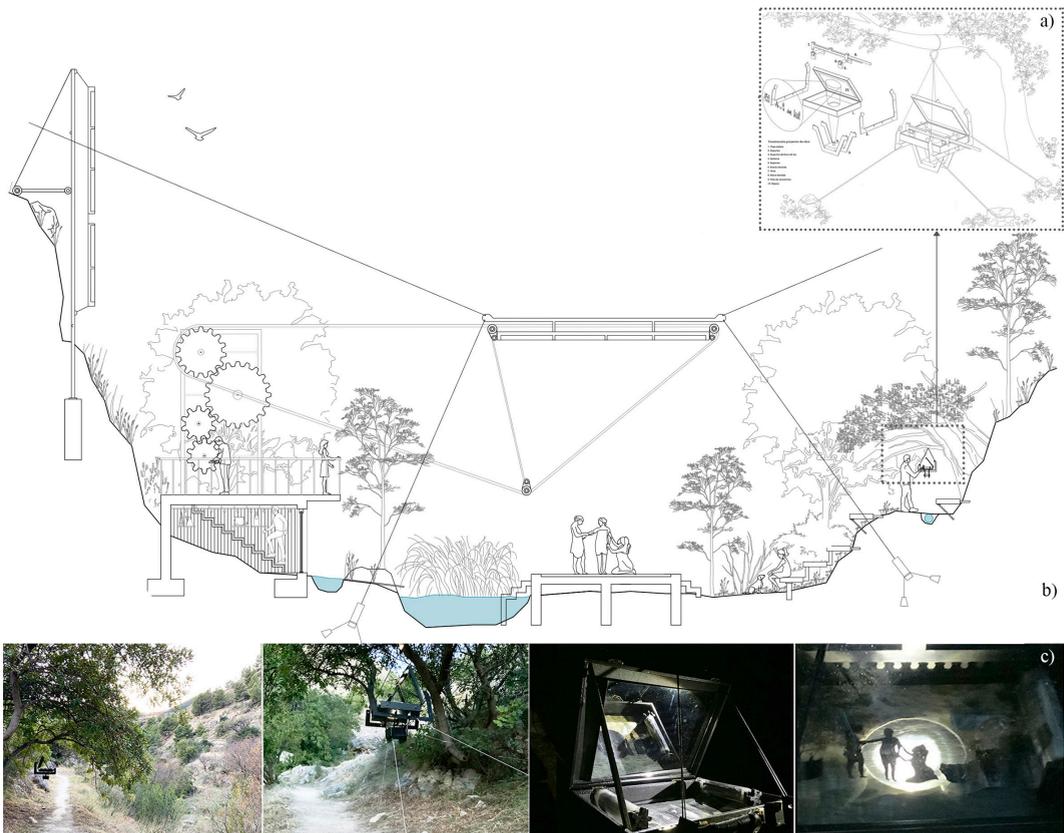
*Manufactured component:* It is a box hanging from a carob tree that surrounds the way to the town's canal. The box is an old travel suitcase with a hole at the bottom to project a source of lightning. A mirror in the interior of the suitcase reflects the light and announces the beginning of the play.

**Fig. 4** Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947/2018, case study 3). Object's design (a); project (b); demonstration (c) (by student Morales Roche, P. 2020).

It works as an analogic video mapping, spreading overhead projected images on the stone walls. At a certain distance, the mirror is also a hologram.

*Rewriting of an excerpt from the book:* told in the third person, it translates an excerpt that talks about the sky and the seasons at a time in which a play is about to begin in the valley:

The lights in the sky and the smells from earth that guide the scenes were sensed, for the first time, by everyone. Each one saw with tranquility that darkness favoured the light's projection, and, at the same time, each saw how the summer settled. The singing of the cicadas in the night sky became higher over the river (by student Paula Morales, 2020).



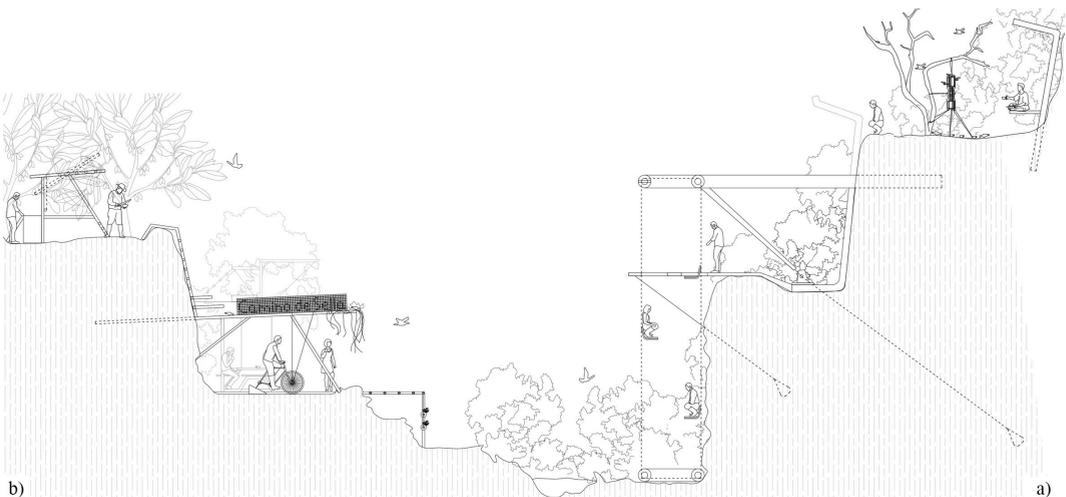
**Fig. 5** Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854/2014, case study 4). Object's design (a); valley's project (b) (by student Torres, A. 2020).

#### **Case study 4: Henry David Thoreau's *Walden: Visitors* (1854/2014, *Visitors*)**

I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society. When visitors came in larger and unexpected numbers there was but the third chair for them all, but they generally economized the room by standing up (Thoreau, 1854/2014, p. 149).

*Landscape project:* The farmer is still harvesting in the cocoa plantation, while one bench below you can see children ready to taste the new variant of chocolate, in the surprising places to sit camouflaged among terraces. It is the cafeteria *Camino de Sella*, a place from where the breezes of the valley will spread the aromas to the walkers (Figure 5).

*Social and restoring function:* This is a place in the valley that translates the idea learned from Thoreau by materializing several different forms of stay and rest. The small café reconciles the possibility of being a social space as well



as a place to explore the limits of senses such as taste and smell. One of them produces the energy needed to run the small bar while pedalling.

*Manufactured component:* The student manufactures a small part of the cafeteria, which corresponds to a coffee grinder that in turn is a bird feeder, by means of vertical ribs and rings, hung from the tree bench and stretched to the sides.

*Rewriting of a fragment of the book:* Narrated in the first person, it retains the use of the imperfect preterite. It also retains the reference to a food space outside the house, introducing the expression of the emotional. For example, the original text reads:

The waste and decay of physical life, which so often needs repair, seemed miraculously retarded in such a case, and the vital vigor stood its ground. I could entertain thus a thousand as well as twenty; and if any ever went away disappointed or hungry from my house when they found me at home, they may depend upon it that I sympathized with them at least (Thoreau, 1854/2014, p. 151),

is rewritten as:

The wear and tear and exhaustion of day to day life, so often in need of mending, and there miraculously appeared the aroma of chocolate, and the happy memories remained firm. In this way I could attend to my family and friends; and if any of them left our meeting in a sad or nostalgic mood you can be sure that, at least, their memories did not cease to accompany them (by student Andrey Torres, 2020),

as a form of fiction that helps to explain the project designed for the valley.

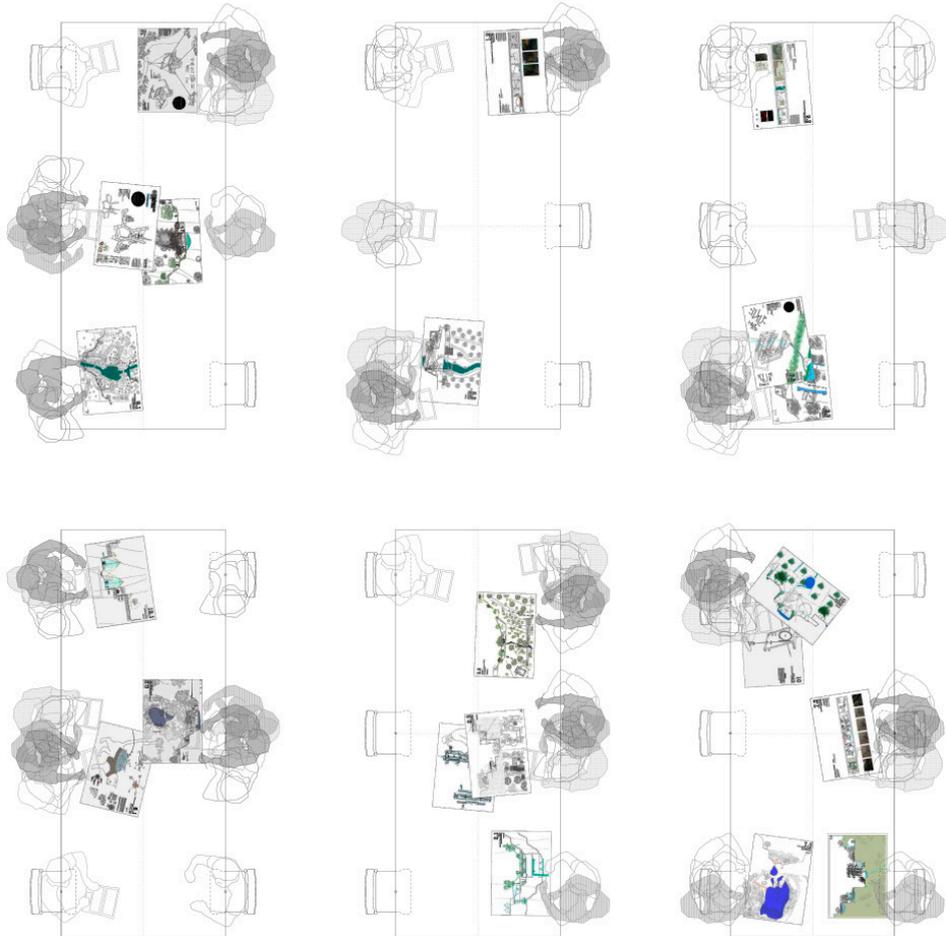
## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From historical literatures inspired by pandemics or cases of social isolation brought to interdisciplinary practices, the workshop finds project statements for a valley

in the Marina Baixa (Spain) converted into a discontinuous care service camouflaged in nature for the care of the nearby rural community. As elucidated in the previous samples, the statements at Sella make a special emphasis on the design of those objects that mediate between the natural substrate subjected to its cycles and the humans for whom they have been conceived in the form of a new culture of uses. For example, in the design based on García Márquez's excerpt (see case study 2), there is a delivery system of saved messages for a convalescent or deceased person, which is partly subject to the speed of the flow of the natural fountain, and partly manually operated thanks to pulleys and tensioners.

The set of fabrications constituted the physical part that activated the emotional component of the experience of each project for the valley. Each fabrication plays the role of threshold, a kind of facilitator between social and natural layers of the project. These designs, colloquially called 'perfumes', tested in the valley, turned out to be open designs, in the first place, to the visitor's response, their origin, state of mind, prejudices and culture. They included 'reality clues' (chocolate, honey, sugar, float, etc.) that facilitated interaction. In addition, the design was open to the contingencies of the weather, gusts of air, the flow of water in the irrigation ditches, as well as the allusion to insects and other animals (shoemakers, cats, sheep, etc.).

The set of designs also constituted a fair of artifacts and an encyclopedia of pop-up stories on the final date of the course, in January 2021. Each design was displayed as in a market stall, with the fabricated model hanging from a ceiling of ropes replacing tree branches in the Sella valley (Marina Baixa), and the set worked properly to convene the rest of the workshop members on an open door's day at the Polytechnic School, as well as to understand the whole landscape project for the valley at once. A key transmedia element turned out to be the video, with the narrating voice of one of the project's characters. A final drawing made from the top of the class-



**Fig. 6** Jose Carrasco, 2021, the classroom at the end of the semester. Overlapped drawing sheets express the evolution of the proposals.

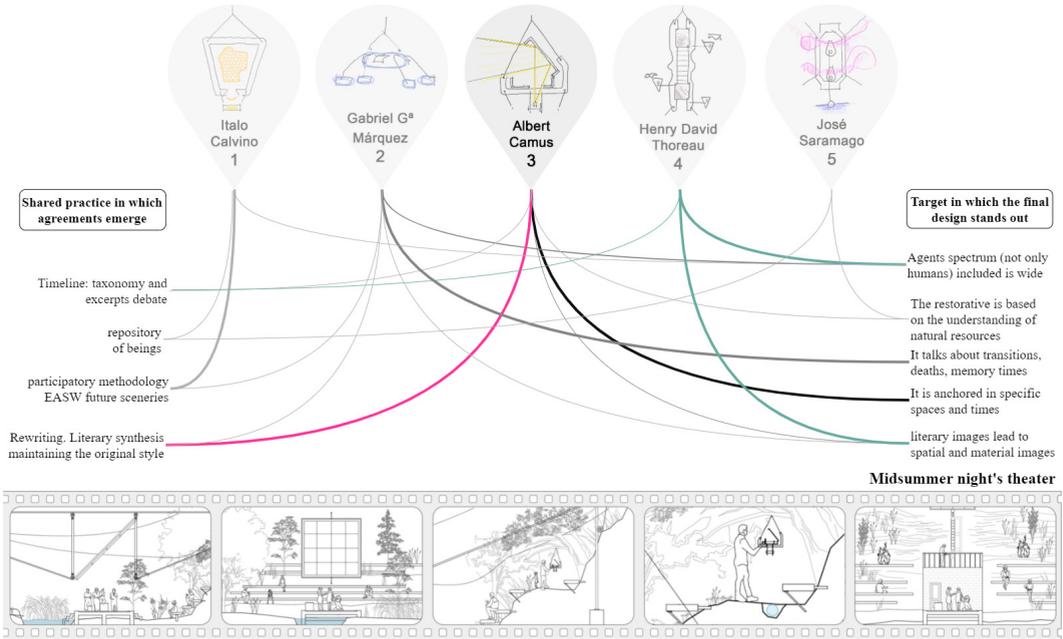
room shows the evolution of a course in which the students had fixed the place where to discuss, design, complete the artifacts, defend the results, etc. This drawing shows the learning time and the evolution in the designs overlapping, through transparent layers, their status week by week. If nothing appears or the depicted chair looks unoccupied, it means that the learning process fails or that the student has left the course. Likewise, if it appears with more layers, it expresses the number of variations explored with the design, the discards and successes (Figure 6).

What is relevant in these pandemic times is that these knowledge pills reach us through literary fictions, cultural creations in which the authors' capacity to rebuild and relate the settings, the atmosphere, the social profiles of a specific period is remarkable. The fact that one of the selected authors was Henry David Thoreau is not a coincidence. He wrote *Walden* in 1854 to:

1. Make manifest that staying at a cabin near lake Concord in the United States would be his way of mourning his brother's death;
2. Show how human beings are yet another species in the environmental chain;
3. Demonstrate that natural perception builds images that integrate the micro-scopic, like lichen to the rock, and the macro, like far away trees or railway routes;
4. To confirm that death is but a phase in the natural cycle, like "fallen flowers or the layers of rotten autumn leaves on the floor of the forest who come back to life one year later" (Wulf 2016, pp. 311-324).

It is precisely Andrea Wulf who insists, however, that it is right to delimit the territory of the projected valley with a 'humboldtian' ambition that reinforces the inseparability between nature and humanity; and, on the other hand, that it is right to support all scientific objectivity with a subjectivity of the senses.

Within the regulated framework of the university degrees that were involved in the project, some questions arose. For example: how can we connect these four practical sessions with the development of a regular course on architectural component design for a rural landscape that seeks some sort of performativity or interactivity with its visitors? There is no simple answer to this question. These interdisciplinary sessions (Figure 7) have helped us secure design statements, but they also help to recognize a series of more transcendental concepts for all students involved in the workshop: firstly, the understanding of the Earth as a fragile space, exposed to natural and seasonal cycles in



**Fig. 7** Jose Carrasco, 2021, shared practices, design targets and design proposal *Midsummer night's theater* (case study 3, Albert Camus's *The Plague*, 1947/2018).

which buildings, furniture and infrastructure are rooted (Teerds 2020; Clément, 2018); secondly, the understanding of the fact that our way of acting is hereditary of our ancestors' way of being, as well as an understanding of the fact that they leave Earth to us so that we can continue it; thirdly, the understanding of the status of non-neutrality of our artifacts and our writings, their haptic abilities and their capacity to materialize stories related to common goods; fourthly, the understanding of architecture not only as a construction, but as a body to safeguard layers of time, traces of life (Teerds, 2020), that recall new stories with which we can identify.

Lastly, the workshop identifies useful issues for communities that are meant to reconnect with these natures through trades and metaphors cited in Boccaccio's, Thoreau's and Calvino's stories, among others: we leave aside the catastrophist part of epidemic stories to focus on forms of survival and social cohesion, those that help us to reinterpret heritage, natural or cultural issues. And, why can

issues related to diseases be useful? The answer has also to do with the opinion of some experts claiming that illness is not only a biological issue (Amezcuca, 2000; Fabregat, 1972) but also a form of living, social interrelation, cultural understanding, transit of pain, suffering, and care, which in Anglo-Saxon terms is known as illness or sickness (the socio-cultural effects of suffering).

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