IN SITU OR PREFABRICATED? – An environmental information centre in Rapa Nui

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Duration: Semester 2

Content: If the Sri Lanka atelier in Semester 1 dealt with the critical management of abundant resources in population-pressured environmens, the atelier in Semester 2 is bound to reflect on the role of architecture in a resource-depleted yet culturally rich setting. The place selected for this investigation is Rapa Nui, the legendary island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, home to the Maoi sculptures and also known as Easter Island, which entirely relies on supplies from the continent for its survival. In spite of its global fame and inscription on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites, Rapa Nui exists on a path of dependency that ties it to the mainland and stymies any proper development opportunity. Historically the victim of major environmental degradation, today’s island relies on tourism it cannot sustain, on food it does not produce, on buildings and infrastructure that are not appropriate. Can architecture and its construction anatomy suggest integrated solutions to this state of permanent crisis? In the belief that a favourable answer must be possible in today’s world, the atelier will concentrate on the design of a small environmental information centre to be built in the centre of Hanga Roa, the capital of Rapa Nui. The structure is to serve as a policy information clearinghouse for the community as well as a testbed for culturally attuned and environmentally responsive construction strategies.

Organisation: As a group, students will produce an analysis of the environmental and industrial context of Rapa Nui against the cultural background of the place. This is aimed at articulating the ambitions of the program while teasing out its structural constraints. Students will then work in groups of 3-5 to develop a thorough building proposal that will address the problems identified in the analysis whilst embedding a possible blueprint for future building activity on the island. The progression of the work will be facilitated by a parallel series of lectures dealing with: a) the history of Rapa Nui and the environmental issues defining its chapters; b) the political economy of development; and c) the analysis of selected architectural interventions in resource-scarce or building tradition-poor locales.

Not unlike Sri Lanka in Semester 1, Rapa Nui is used as an ideal-type example, this time of a larger reflection exercise concerning isolation and self-sufficiency in the contemporary world. For such reason, the emphasis of the teaching unit will continue to be on analytical approaches to the problem rather than direct physical experience of the locale.

Resources: Documentation of site, industrial context, social conditions and architectural references will be provided by FAR.

Language: English