

Across the Board 2016

*What does it mean to be
able to think, work, and
operate across domains?*

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Maria Lamslag With Mihaela Rădescu

On Architecture, Education, and Exchange

Mihaela Rădescu (1986, Tirgu-Mureș, Romania) is an independent Rotterdam-based architect and designer. Among others, she collaborates with Horta Museum (Brussels), Collective East (a group of young architects spread across Europe), and with Tom Postma Design on the exhibition design for the Prospects and Concepts exhibition at Art Rotterdam.

Maria Lamslag: You participated in the *Across the Board* program, exploring cultural value creation through a cross-sectoral network. What is culture to you and where do you see the added value of involving different fields?

Mihaela Rădescu: For me, culture is a dynamic, vibrant set of complex relations between material and immaterial forces, manifestations of what people do or make, which we can see, hear, touch, smell, or taste. It is an intangible component in our lives, resulting from how people are, behave, and think. Therefore, culture isn't an island unrelated to its surroundings, but rather it overlaps with all aspects and components of our societies. It contributes as much as other realms to the evolution of humankind, and to the evolution of our world.

When we are talking about the 'cultural field,' cross-overs are necessary and highly valuable. Without them, the cultural field would become self-referential, which is contrary to what I claim culture is: a mirror of society in both form and content.

ML: How do you professionally contribute to this? How do you interact with other fields of work?

MR: Studying architecture appealed to me because it embodies several creative disciplines. As a freelance architect, I aim to transform my professional activity into my testing ground. I always try to take on projects with strong public, cultural, and artistic components, and I enjoy working on projects that allow me to engage with the art world from a different vantage point and to interact with various creative professionals.

A setting in which I am able to test borders is with Collective East. Together with young architects from Romania, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands we take on projects ranging from architecture competitions to art installations. Our latest project is a self-initiated interdisciplinary research project about the reactivation of Bucharest's public libraries, under the name of BiblioHUB. The project was kick-started in September 2015, when a grant offered the possibility of an exploration, inventory, and analysis of Bucharest's public library system, through interdisciplinary dialogue with experts between the Netherlands and Romania. The collected findings were presented on the BiblioHUB website (www.bibliohub.org) in an indexing study, corroborating statistical data with spatial information, photo surveys, qualitative evaluations, as well as relevant models of Romanian and international initiatives.

I think my curiosity for variation also comes from my cultural upbringing. Both my parents are actors, and I practically grew up in theaters and on tour. At a very young age I witnessed the preparations and activities backstage but also the final presentations onstage. This position of being between various creative disciplines inspired me to test these borders, both theoretically and practically.

Maïte García Lechner

Culture can't consist of feelings, good or bad, of specific communities into an artistic product. Whether this is a protest song by Bob Dylan or Beyoncé, the modernity-

ML: Speaking of your upbringing, you were born in the heart of Transylvania and grew up in Bucharest. What brought you to Rotterdam, and later made you decide to work in Bucharest again?

MR: During my first years of studying architecture in Bucharest, I realized the educational system in Romania wasn't enough to support my ambitions. I went to France for a year, followed by Rotterdam in 2010 to study an MSc program at the architecture faculty of Delft University of Technology.

Working in Bucharest with the BiblioHUB project is all about value creation through culture, which is what drew me back. Libraries are a neutral playground and play a powerful role in bringing together communities. They can promote education and support personal and community development. For countries like Romania, filled with the potential of its people and ideas, but without a framework to develop these ideas, this is specifically interesting. The lack of a functional framework and the absence of a real sense of community are, paradoxically, strongly related to Romania's communist background. Given the 'flattened' environment of nationalized communism, where everything and everyone was supposedly equal, and then with the fall of this communist regime, many people were left divided. In response to current situations of the government undermining its citizens, a new sense of community is luckily emerging through a growing activist attitude in the younger generations.

Libraries are able to catalyze that attitude. The network is already there, but it is outdated and not really used to empower people. The first phase of BiblioHUB was all about setting up a framework that can work with the existing infrastructure. The project is ongoing, and thanks to a collective effort, we started appearing on the radar of other public libraries in the country. What is challenging is that there's no clear legal framework about how public and private parties can work together, and how to get the latter interested in investing.

ML: Is it your ambition to specialize in this niche?

MR: I am not planning on specializing. I am too curious about too many things, and I'm not a big fan of fragmentation, either. Closer to graduation I noticed that architecture tends to get very specialized, judging by the job openings and PhD subjects offered. What does it lead to, an architect designing only doorknobs? Of course, specializations are not only about this zooming-in, yet an equipped architectural mind can understand all the forces in society and materialize it. When you get too specialized, you risk closing down, rather than opening up, the profession.

Given my professional plans, I think working with other disciplines is of essential importance. Within the architectural realm, I have always appreciated the intrinsic generalist approach. I find it valuable in setting up the prerequisite for constant crossovers, thus broadening our knowledge and professional responses to tomorrow's society. Given the speed at which society is moving, we don't always have (or take) the time to define what we are doing per se.

ML: By interacting with other sectors or disciplines, you get a better understanding of the frameworks and dynamics in fields unknown to you. Do you think our current education system is behind on this?

MR: We should think of new structures that give way to flexibility within these dynamics. For architecture schools, that could mean offering super-specialized courses in response to the clear need within society. And when you think specialization is going so deep that it loses its purpose, you pull back, reassess, and reconfigure accordingly. Education and specialization should evolve in a dynamic way. There should be a balance, however, it's not so much about finding a perfect recipe for that balance. It is a recipe that is always changing.

I would like to see more open and accessible platforms. Crossovers can take place in coordinated programs and public-private partnerships, but also in self-initiated collaborations. I don't think everything should be institutionalized. Many institutions are driven by political and financial motivations, which inevitably gives them a 'strict' edge.

ML: What can individuals do to skill themselves in opening up their work to other sectors and disciplines?

MR: I think that in any collaboration, there are a few key tools for professional dialogue: leaving the ego at the door, ensuring there are no hidden agendas, and listening and communicating freely. Only like this can we truly learn from each other and make the best out of the collaborative project. It's not so much a matter of actually learning the skills, but more about understanding the flux of these unknown territories.

ML: Speaking of unknown territories, and coming back again to the *Across the Board* masterclasses, with whom of the program participants would you like to spend a day learning more about their field?

MR: It would be interesting to spend a day with all of the participants to work on a group assignment of some sort, which would allow us to know each other better professionally, and to make use of our potential.

With the lectures, two stood out in terms of learning things from a totally different perspective than my own: the class of Renilde Steeghs on cultural diplomacy, and Ron Soonieus's on leadership and governance in the art world and the commercial realm. However, if I could spend a day with only one of the lecturers, it would definitely be Cuauhtémoc Medina. Not only because he worked very closely with Francis Alÿs, one of my favorite artists, but also because it was just a pleasure to hear the stories behind his artistic practice and the contextual forces that drove him to change from politics to art.

Yoeri Meessen

As an independent contractor, Maria Lamslag (1988, Harderwijk, the Netherlands) works on research and stories for (documentary) films, photography, and journalism. At Kunsten '92, a lobby organization for the Dutch arts and culture sector, she works as a project manager.

Challenging and re-orienting our thinking across domains, actually cooperating, is a skill.



Across the Board

Concept
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Acknowledgements

Witte de With would like to thank all contributors to this publication, the visiting tutors, and the participants of the first edition of *Across the Board*, and we would like to thank ABN AMRO's Het Culturele Hart, Kunsten '92, NVTC, Platform Beeldende Kunst, Rot.Jong, Heleen Alberdingk Thijm, Leendert Bikker, Rob Defares, Bram de Jaeger, Marlof Maks, Rune Peitersen, Ilona Roolvink, Jaurana Verschuren, Marianne Versteegh, and Lise van Zaalen for their input and support preceding and during the realization of the project.

Across the Board is supported by the Mondriaan Fund and the Pauwhof Fund. Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art is supported by the city of Rotterdam (DKC) and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW).



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Across the Board is a long-term platform for professional development through cross-disciplinary exchange. Led by visiting tutors – significant agents in the fields of art, business, and politics – a select group of promising professionals works together to locate (and re-evaluate) shared values between their respective domains, and to confront the opposing philosophies and methodological frictions that arise through such exchanges. With *Across the Board*, Witte de With sets out to trace a more pluralized and nuanced trajectory for cooperations across the public, private, and cultural domains. This publication concludes the first pilot program, and serves as a prologue to the second year of *Across the Board*.

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The question of how
we take responsibility
for plurality defines
how we shape our society.

