FROM ELEMENT TO PLACE: A FIRST-YEAR DESIGN METHOD BASED ON THE GRAMMAR–LOGIC–RHETORIC TRIAD

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a didactic method for teaching foundations of architectural design in the first-year studio. The approach rests on two pillars: designing from week one and a fixed sequence of elementary tasks—element → opening → plane → object → path → pavilion. A guiding triad—grammar–logic–rhetoric—aligns compositional/tectonic rules, spatial behaviour in time, and clear argumentation. Methodologically, we report practice-based qualitative evidence from a large cohort (100–150 students; 7 tutors), with a weekly rhythm and overlapping assignments mapped to Kolb's experiential cycle. Standardised deliverables (diagram, orthographic drawings, axon/perspective, concise text; models where relevant) document decisions and proofs. Results indicate faster engagement and higher conceptual clarity without resorting to trivial tasks. We discuss limits (formalism, limited quantification) and mitigations, and argue for the transferability of the "element-to-space" curriculum skeleton.

KEYWORDS: architecture education; first-year studio; design pedagogy; grammar–logic–rhetoric; sequence of tasks; threshold and light; tectonics; figure; object–place field; path design; pavilion; Kolb cycle; qualitative case study; curriculum design

INTRODUCTION

The first studio is often the most intense encounter of beginners with the architectural discipline: beside enthusiasm comes uncertainty, different skills, and simplified ideas about the result. The common ground is the ability to make informed decisions and to see their consequences in drawings and models. Therefore, this text defends two mutually supporting pillars:

1. designing from the first week

2. working in a fixed sequence of elementary tasks: compositional element → opening → surface → object → path → pavilion.

Thesis: spatial literacy, critical judgement, and authorial responsibility can be developed most effectively in the first year if the student from the beginning experiences choice (what is essential and why), proof (how the choice appears in drawings and perspective), and message (how to express the principle clearly and briefly). We formulate these three requirements as the triad grammar–logic–rhetoric: "grammar" means compositional and tectonic order, "logic" means the behaviour of space in time and its sensory effects, and "rhetoric" means clear representation and defence.

Research question: Does the sequence of elementary tasks and explicit work with the triad grammar–logic–rhetoric help to engage first-year students faster and more intensively in architectural design? A second question: Does this "framework" serve as a transferable structure, on which it is possible to attach programme, standards, and typology without losing the clarity of the concept?

We do not make quantitative comparison in terms of percentage improvement. We present a qualitative, practice-based overview of specific tasks from first-year works (more than 150 students, a team of 7 teachers). The goal is not the selection of "best images", but an overview of diverse results.

METHODOLOGICAL BASIS

Students learn to think architecturally not by collecting data, but by creating – by choosing, setting hierarchy, and defining, all in the rhythm of short tasks. We follow the development (sketch – diagram – drawings – model – short text) through different types of consultations (individual and group, open discussion among all students and teachers is welcome) with overlap between several tasks.

Form and tectonics: The first year needs a "common language" for composition and readability (e.g. Ching, 2015; von Meiss, 2018). Tectonic logic – what carries and what is carried – gives the design credibility (e.g. Deplazes, 2013; van der Laan, 2012).

Phenomenology: Space is "read" through body, light, and movement (e.g. Rasmussen, 1977; Pallasmaa, 2012). At the scale of path and city, configuration and clarity of passage are decisive (e.g. Hillier, 2015; Norberg-Schulz, 2010).

This double framework would not be enough without rhetoric – the ability to clearly show what is essential and to defend the design decision (e.g. Rowe, 2007; Zumthor, 2009). Therefore, three elements are necessary: the diagram (what is essential), the drawings (proof), and the short text (argument).

From the early phase of teaching, the focus is on reasoning, not on simple quantified evaluation. Simple metrics (for example light tests or configuration clarity of passage) are used where they strengthen understanding, not as a replacement for architectural judgement.

CURRICULAR STRUCTURE OF ZAN 1,2

Organization of the week. Each meeting has three stable parts: a short introductory lecture (about a principle, precedent, or tool), independent work, and consultations (during the afternoon students can talk alternately with different teachers. Students are guided to listen and learn also from consultations of their classmates), and submission of partial tasks with reflection. Consultations are intentionally diverse. Sometimes they focus more on meaning and composition, other times on clarity of presentation. We evaluate together, all teachers, according to three criteria: composition and tectonics, spatial readability, and clarity of message. Attendance and timely submission are monitored as basic requirements.

Each task lasts about six weeks; the next one begins in the fifth week. The overlap leads students to work on different tasks at the same time. One task is being finalized while the next one begins. This rhythm also follows Kolb's cycle: experience–reflection–generalization–experiment (Kolb, 2014).

Media and outputs. The basis consists of drawings, axonometry/perspective, diagram, and short text. A model is required for selected tasks. The rule is clarity and internal consistency across all media (Ching, 2015; Rowe, 2007).

Focus of tasks. Each task has a different main point. Some are without a specific location (so that the student cannot hide behind "solving the site" before having a clear principle), some have a given site. Sometimes the focus is on craft and composition (compositional element), other times on threshold and light (opening), division and connection (surface), tectonic readability and relation part–whole (object), sequence and orientation (path), or creation of interior space and its boundaries (pavilion).

TRIAD GRAMMAR–LOGIC–RHETORIC

Grammar gives the design order: the relation of figure and background, organization (centralization, line, radial, cluster, grid), compositional principles (axis, symmetry/asymmetry, hierarchy, rhythm, contrast), and tectonics (carrying × carried, edge, joint, transition). Grammar is not a style or a rule. It is an alphabet (Ching, 2015; von Meiss, 2018).

Logic creates the sense and meaning of each space in time: configuration, network, paths, and hierarchy remove impression and transform emotion into understandable qualities of each element or space (Hillier, 2015; Norberg-Schulz, 2010).

Rhetoric ensures the clarity of the message: diagrams separate the essential from the non-essential, drawings are proofs, and the short text formulates the argument. The layout of the poster is not understood only as a graphic skill, but as part of the design. Confusion in formal presentation often reflects confusion in thinking (Rowe, 2007; Zumthor, 2009).

The triad is also a brake on aestheticization. It requires order, meaning, and clarity at the same time. If one of these poles is missing, it can be identified and corrected (Olgiati, 2019).

SEQUENCE OF TASKS: FROM ELEMENT TO SPACE

The sequence compositional element → opening → surface → object → path → pavilion builds teaching on the gradual extension of skills. From the compositional element and its relations (order, rhythm, joint) through thresholds and light (reading space by the body) and coherent field (division and connection) to tectonic readability (part–whole) and walking sequence (configuration), up to the creation of an interior space with a convincing boundary. Each task has a different focus, but all of them overlap. The result of one task becomes a skill for the next one. In practice, it means that in every phase the student focuses on a few essential topics — and is able to show them clearly (drawing/model/text). In this way, from the beginning, the student learns to decide, not to decorate.

Compositional element. It is an exercise in restraint. The goal is a minimum of shapes and a maximum of relations. The student learns hierarchy and rhythm, distinguishes what is the datum and what is variation. The key is the joint, division, and spatial structure — not as decoration, but as a carrier of order. On the smallest unit it is best visible whether there is a proper composition, whether rhythm can work with pause, whether the gap is intentional, and whether scale and proportion are present in principle. When variability gets out of control, we return to a single rule and its consistent variation. When the joint slips into ornament, we return it to the logic of composition. The goal is not a "nice pattern" but a meaningful structure (Fig. 1–2).

Opening. From a "hole in the surface" it becomes an element (or elements). The threshold is a band (covered fore-space – semi-public niche – door). The shape and depth of the reveal create light gradients that hold scale and intimacy. The opening is a form-giving unit. In section it must be readable where shadow appears, how the flow of light shows on the reveal, and where the real transition between outside and inside occurs. If the opening floats without context, we return to grammar (axis, rhythm, datum). If it is only an effect, we ask about the meaning, which must be confirmed by drawing and model (Fig. 3–4).

Surface. It is not a "cluster of cells," but division and connection into a coherent field. We work with rhythm, contrast, and human scale. The goal is coherence without monotony. Figures help to verify that the background really "expands" and the field holds together. One simple compositional principle (axis, band, grid) protects against purposeless design. We introduce a dominant — emptiness or contrast — to create a focus, and at the same time we ensure that exception is readable for better orientation and not self-serving. The surface is the basic mediator between element and space (Fig. 5–6).

Object. The goal of the task is to design an object as a generator of surrounding space – a body that by its form, figure, placement, height, or porosity creates a magnetic field, a local center, a focus that organizes near and distant relations (square, courtyard, corner). We do not solve the interior, but the principle is the same. For us, the exterior space founded by the object is primary. We work with edges (wall, colonnade), cover (canopy, cornice, tree crown), base (step, bench), and openings framing views – their mutual configuration defines the degree of enclosure, orientation, and movement. Scale and distance (near – middle – far field), rotation and layering give space clarity and quality for staying. The proof is the plan (how the void holds together), section through intermediate space, and elevations (where a node appears, where the horizon opens/closes). We evaluate whether the object creates a clear field, maintains hierarchy of places, and guides paths (Fig. 7–8).

Path. It is a sequence and also a configuration. A good path is a figure that leads and at the same time offers places to stay. It alternates narrowing/widening, light/shadow, straight/oblique, and creates readable nodes and thresholds. In plan, the readability of movement can be estimated by depth and integration. When the network is too complex, we return to meaning and quality of nodes. When "dead spaces" appear, a small geometric correction is often enough. The sequence is complemented by scale archetypes — railing, cornice, lamp — to balance "mind and body" (Fig. 9).

Pavilion. The last task does not aim at a "synthesis of everything," but at creating interior space and its boundaries. The pavilion is an intimate test of thickness and tectonic naturalness of the envelope, light, and scale, and at the same time a test of rhetorical clarity. We start with the interior. We define the "inner room" (intimacy, acoustics, view), and only then we draw the outer outline. A formal envelope alone is not enough; the goal is the relation between exterior and interior form with one defining principle (raumplan, plan libre, spatial plan) to which everything else is subordinated. The result should be calm form chosen with disciplined limitation of means (Fig. 10).

The sequence of tasks from element to space is not a catalogue of skills. On the element the student learns to distinguish rule and mistake. On the opening, to understand threshold and gradients. On the surface, to control field and scale. On the object, to create a magnetic field. On the path, to compose time and orientation. In the pavilion, to create an interior that stands by its boundary, light, and scale. Each step develops

a part of essential skills and passes it on. The joint and thickness return in the reveal, the perforation of surface becomes a façade, the magnetic field of the object creates a node, and the experience of sequence co-forms the pavilion. The teaching is therefore clear and transferable. The student knows what question they are solving, in what language they defend it, and what proof they present.

CASES OF TASKS

The examples serve as clear evidence of process and approach — how the solutions are presented differently and how the triad grammar–logic–rhetoric is expressed from the compositional element to the pavilion. We deliberately choose various approaches to show that quality does not lie in one style, but in precision of design, reasoning, and invention.

The results of students in subjects ZAN 1 and ZAN 2 in 2023/24 and 2024/25 show a stable level of submitted works. In the academic year 2023/24, students in ZAN 1 received grades as follows: excellent 20%, very good 56%, good 21%, and failed 4%. In ZAN 2 in the same year, the distribution was similar: excellent 23%, very good 65%, good 8%, and failed 4%. In 2024/25, there was a stronger focus on consistent quality across tasks. In ZAN 1, 15% of works were graded excellent, 60% very good, 19% good, and 6% failed. In ZAN 2, 10% achieved excellent, 54% very good, 25% good, and 11% failed. These results do not indicate worsening of submitted work, but rather that excellent works are more often distributed across individual tasks, which makes the final "excellent" grade harder to reach. At the same time, students who successfully complete the subject consistently deliver solid and high-quality outputs. The article does not further analyse detailed assessment of individual works, but it will be possible in the future to continue this analysis and connect it with results from other studios.
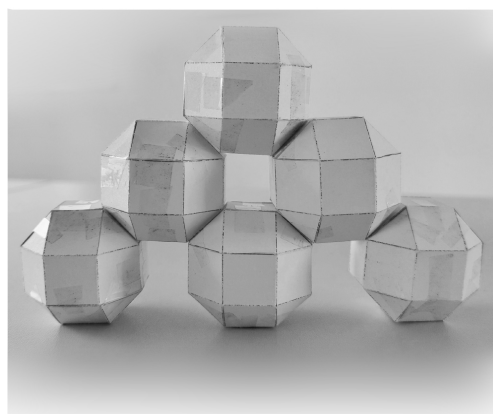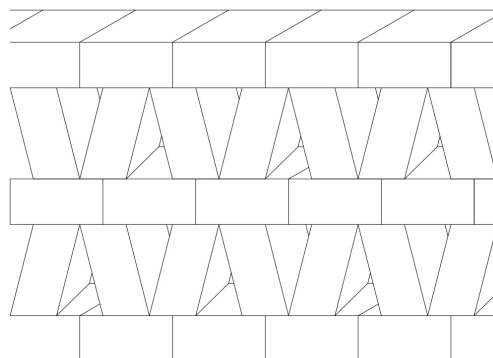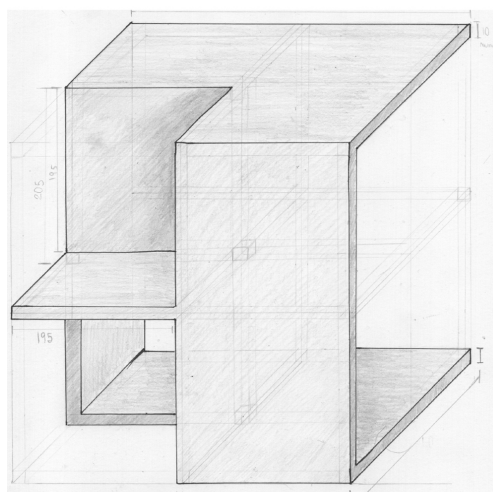

Fig. 1.: Compositional element, year 2023/2024, authors (top to bottom): Zuzana Ryšavá, Daniel Dostál, Filip Grosman. Compilation and selection: author (Source: Ryšavá, 2023; Dostál, 2023; Grosman, 2023)
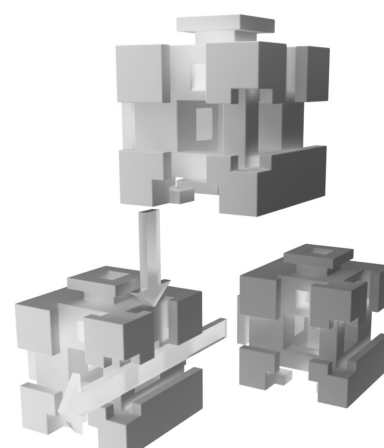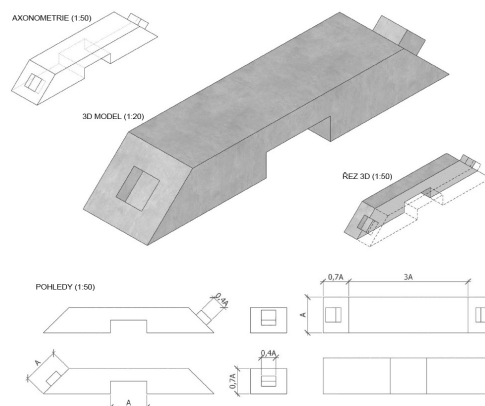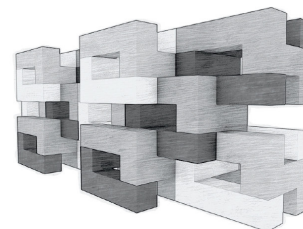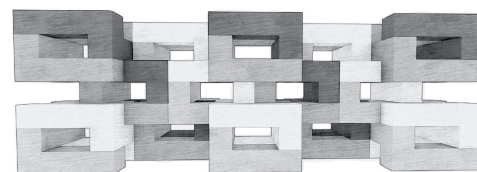

Fig. 2.: Compositional element, year 2024/2025, authors (top to bottom): Miroslav Volný, Pavel Růžovský, Patrik Čapka. Compilation and selection: author (Source: Volný, 2024; Růžovský, 2024; Čapka, 2024)

Compositional element 2023/2024 (Fig. 1). Three approaches to the element: (1) a porous field created by overlapping elements, (2) a single change – beveling of two edges – opens a wide range of compositional possibilities, (3) a simple volume designed for spatial composition in several variants. The focus on the joint and the datum rule shows that the grammar of the element and the logic of its combinatorics are equally essential.

Compositional element 2024/2025 (Fig. 2). All three examples work with "interlocking": (1) The element allows sliding and rotation, the field is rigid. (2) Variations inspired by wooden joints are firm and readable. (3) A more complex volume assembles walls into precise locks – tectonic rigidity is part of the concept. Good compositionality is a structural property, not an ornament.

Opening: entrance to former slaughterhouse 2023/24 (Fig. 3). Different works deal also with differences in terrain and floor levels. (1) A restrained portal unifies simple doors into a strong threshold. (2) A recessed entrance with ramp and side stairs, an abstracted half-arch vault – "Plečnik-like" restraint without citation or reference. (3) A new form referring to circle and diagonal façade motives, but remaining clearly contemporary.
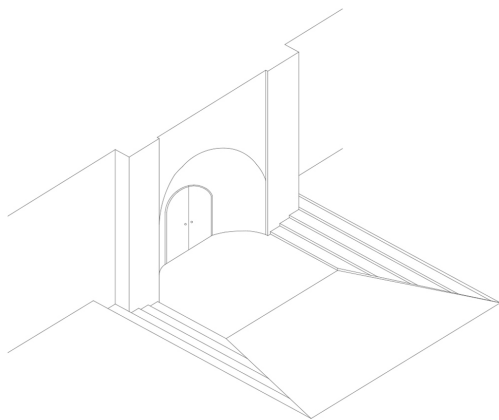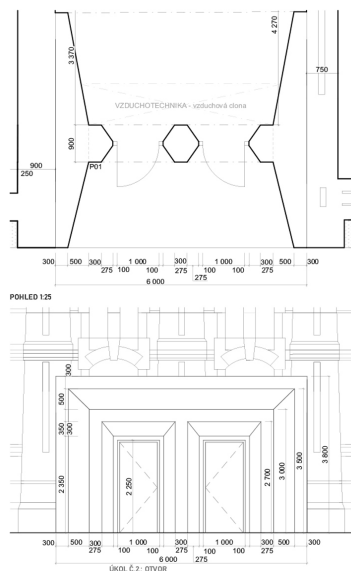

Fig. 3.: Opening: Entrance to former Ostrava slaughterhouse, year 2023/2024, authors (top to bottom): Pavel Dorociak, Andrea Mikešová, Izabela Hanzelková. Compilation and selection: author (Source: Dorociak, 2023; Mikešová, 2023; Hanzelková, 2023)
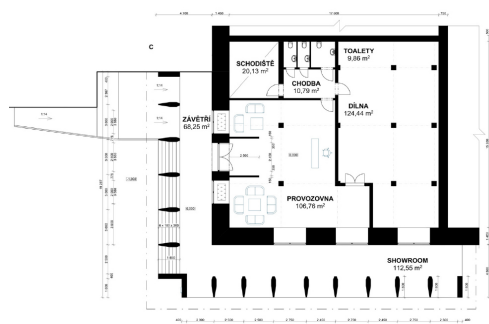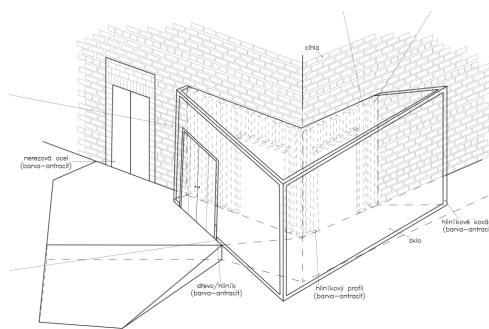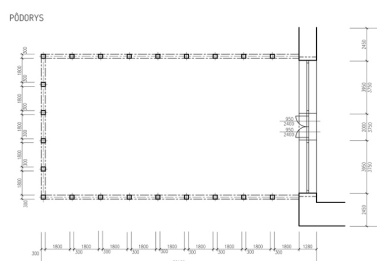

Fig. 4.: Opening: Post-industrial hall, year 2024/2025, authors (top to bottom): Petra Simová, Karolina Vedrová, Adam Profota. Compilation and selection: author (Source: Simová, 2024; Vedrová, 2024; Profota, 2024)

Opening: post-industrial hall 2024/25 (Fig. 4). The task works with a hall in one of the former Ostrava mines, including a complex of buildings and extensions. (1) An added volume with clear geometry absorbs all transitions and creates a new, readable frame. (2) In contrast, a minimalist corner as a "beacon" uses existing openings and a contrast corresponding, for example, to current preferences in heritage care. (3) An extended terrace integrates ramps and stairs, follows the rhythm of columns, and opens the corner.

Surface: Church Square 2023/24 (Fig. 5). Complex terrain, additions to the church, and remains of fortifica-tions. Selected designs, instead of a "functional plan," propose a clear, unified surface to which the operation adapts. They work with the hierarchy of bands, empti-ness, and the dominance of the sacred figure. The re-sult is a shared space without preference for different types of traffic – first the field, then the function.

Surface: FAST Garden 2024/25 (Fig. 6). The unan-chored edge requires new order. Two designs use lines for division and hierarchy; the central example inserts a generous circular field that unifies the space and gives it scale. Generous surface grammar better suppresses the complexity and lack of structure of the site; purely linear solutions end rather as functional organization.

Object: confluence of Ostravice and Lučina rivers 2023/24 (Fig. 7). Three place-making strategies: (1) A solitary object as magnetic core and small mounds as secondary elements. (2) A dispersion of 23 slender elements forming a circle – symbol of connection of all three riverbanks. (3) No vertical form, only a net-work of paved lines crossing in a focus point. Different approaches in the form of object, field, or line can all create a place.
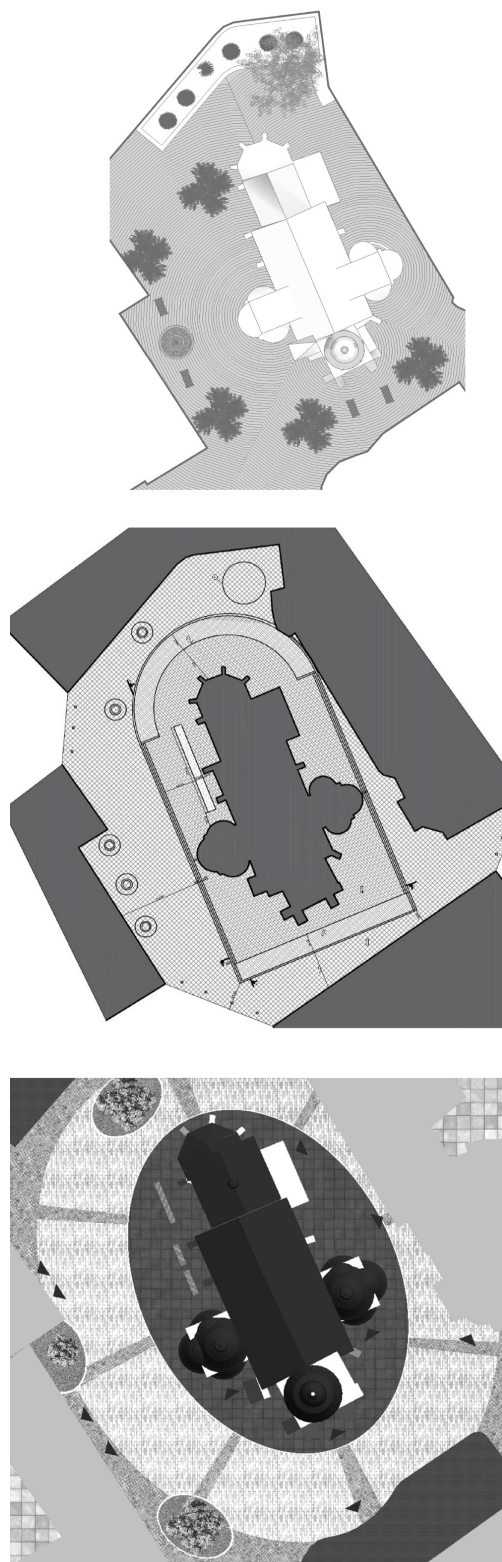

Fig. 5.: Surface: Church Square, year 2023/2024, authors (top to bottom): Mariana Polášková, Viktorie Mádrová, Katarina Hofierková. Compilation and selection: author (Source: Polášková, 2023; Mádrová, 2023; Hofi-erková, 2023)
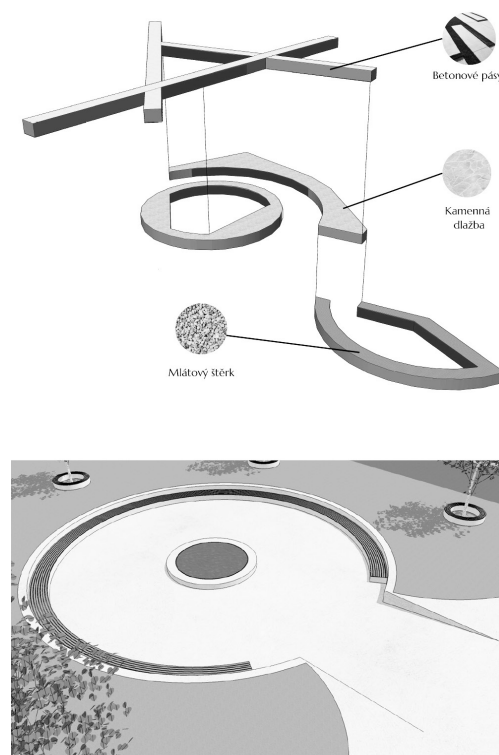
Fig. 6.: Surface: FAST Garden, year 2024/2025, authors (top to bottom): Anežka Planková, Nikola Lusková, Karolina Vedrová. Compilation and selec-tion: author (Source: Planková, 2024; Lusková, 2024; Vedrová, 2024)

Object: Memorial to victims of the war in Ukraine 2024/25 (Fig. 8). Variety of approaches, high quality. (1) A broken circle with a pair of human silhouettes creates a space for staying. (2) A traditional monument on a pedestal with expression of dignity. (3) An abstract "inscription" of solid volumes, passages vary in width – the "forced" effect of passage was discussed. Common scale and work with light give the designs weight without gesture.

Path: corridor in an apartment building 2023/24 (Fig. 9). Loosely specified layouts. (1) A segmented corridor follows the division of flats; cores create clear nodes of the plan. (2) A circular motif continues into the staircase and elevator, entrances to flats are around the corner – forming protected vestibules. (3) A "ravine" of a gallery house with organic profile teaches discipline of drawing and composition. The path is a series of figures, not a leftover space.

Pavilion 2024/25 (Fig. 10). Three different approaches to interior space. (1) A dismantlable wooden frame with membrane – the structure defines expression both outside and inside. (2) Free addition of volumes with skylights, various sizes = various lighting and connections. (3) Strong geometry of plan and roof that carries the whole spatial structure.

The examples show that students can, in a short time, transform a principle into a concrete design. It is not about one correct form, but about clear composition, verified logic, and understandable rhetoric. Where these three levels meet, a complex architectural design emerges.

LIMITS AND THEIR BALANCING

Quantification. Phenomenological qualities (light, haptics, calmness of form) cannot be reduced to a single number. At the same time, we do not ignore measurable minima where they help understanding (for example simple light tests, basic acoustic consideration, or configuration clarity of passage). We use them as a corrective, not as a replacement for judgement (Norberg-Schulz, 1979; Valena, 2018).

Fig. 7.: Object: Confluence of Ostravice and Lučina rivers, year 2023/2024, authors (top to bottom): Pavel Dorociak, Tomáš Křížek, Matěj Lasák. Compilation and selection: author (Source: Dorociak, 2024; Křížek, 2024; Lasák, 2024)
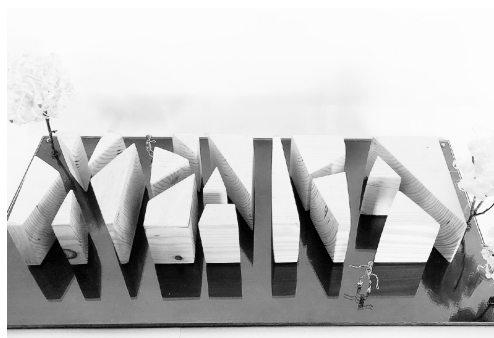
Fig. 8.: Object: Memorial to victims of the war in Ukraine, year 2024/2025, authors (top to bottom): Yaroslav Kachurovskyi, Monika Šuláková, Barbora Štorková. Compilation and selection: author (Source: Kachurovskyi, 2025; Šuláková, 2025; Štorková, 2025)

Risk of formalism. Work with "grammar" can lead to a formal ritual. The counterbalance is twofold: phenomenology – space must be understood by the body; tectonics – the section and joint must make sense. In practice, it means that every "beautiful" decision must have spatial and structural logic (Olgiati, 2019).

Variability of teachers. Seven teachers intentionally bring different opinions – this is the intention. The robustness of evaluation is increased by shared consultations and common minimum outputs (diagram, drawings, model, text). Different, but argument-based opinions are beneficial for students.

Digital tools and AI. AI is used instrumentally (research, post-production). The authorship of concept and decisions remains with the student. We require that the student can explain why their solution is the best in given conditions.

CONCLUSION

The presented method stands on a simple but demanding ambition: to design from the first week and to insist that every decision can be understood grammatically (composition/tectonics), logically (behaviour/meaning), and rhetorically (communication/defence). The sequence of elementary tasks — compositional element → opening → surface → object → path → pavilion — provides a clear "framework" on which programmatic complexity, standards, and metrics can later be attached without losing the clarity of the principle.

The documented cases show that students, in a short time, are able to name what they do and why, and to prove it in drawings. The limits (quantification, formalism) are balanced by observable minima and, above all, by joint consultation and evaluation by up to seven teachers.

We do not want the first year to become a "production of effects" or a "catalogue of analyses." We want it to become a place of learning responsible creation: what is essential, how to express it most precisely, and how to prove it. In this way, from the first semester, students acquire what we believe makes an architect an architect – the ability to seek the best possible solution in given time and place and to take responsibility for it.
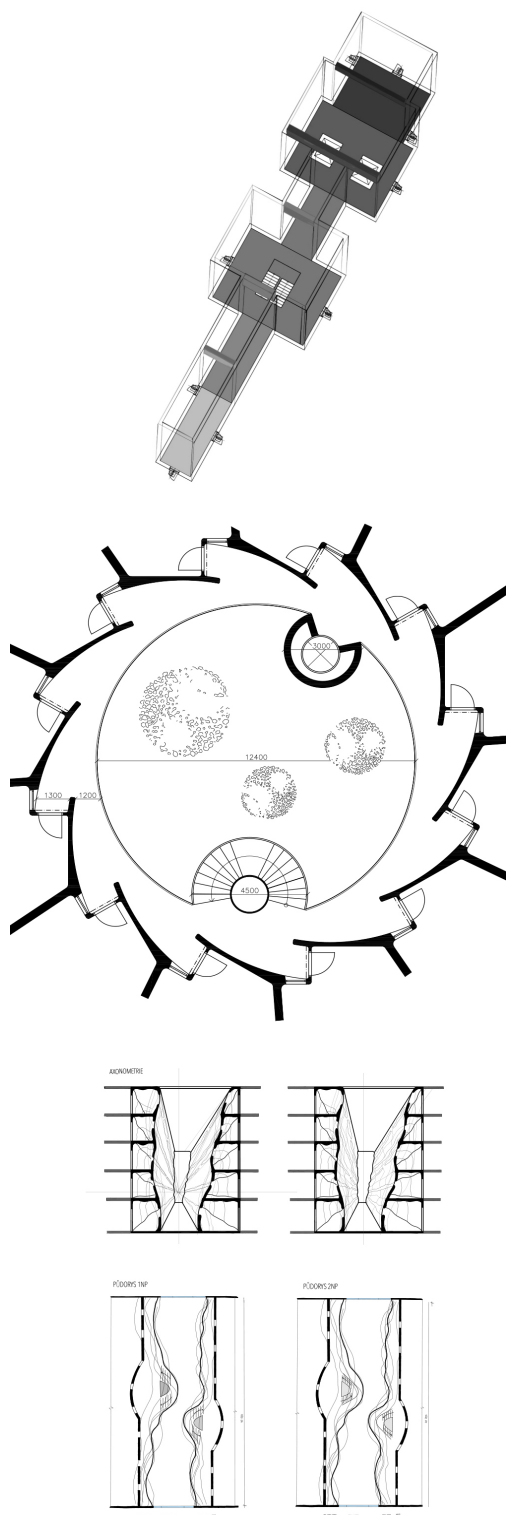

Fig. 9.: Path: Corridor in an apartment building, year 2023/2024, authors (top to bottom): Zuzana Topinková, Klára Zavadilová, Eliška Talandová. Compilation and selection: author (Source: Topinková, 2025; Zavadilová, 2025; Talandová, 2025)
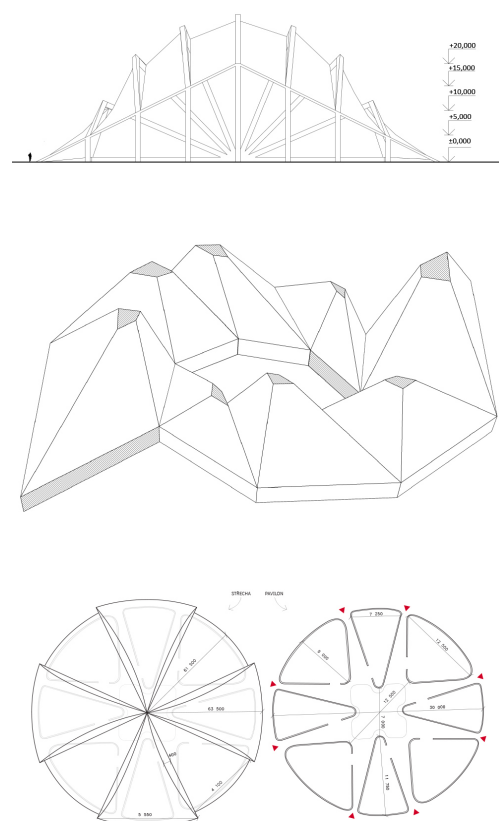

Fig. 10.: Pavilion, year 2024/2025, authors (top to bottom): Nella Kulhánková, Petra Simová, Karolina Vedrová. Compilation and selection: author (Source: Kulhánková, 2025; Simová, 2025; Vedrová, 2025)

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