

A Thematic and Context-Based Design Studio Approach: A Case Study of the Academy of Art and Performance Studio

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Abstract: This study presents a qualitative, design-based investigation of a thematic, context-based architectural design studio titled “Academy of Art and Performance,” conducted in Gaziantep and hosted by the Department of Architecture at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University. The studio was structured as a vertical design environment that integrated second- and third-year students and was guided by a sensory-driven thematic framework centered on “sound” as a conceptual driver. The research examines how thematic design approaches influence students’ spatial thinking, contextual awareness, and architectural outcomes. The methodology is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of nine student projects, supported by studio documentation, including drawings, models, jury evaluations, and instructor observations. An analytical framework comprising five evaluation themes—urban and cultural context, sound-based conceptualization, integration of production, performance, and education, form and spatial organization, and heritage reinterpretation—was developed and applied through a comparative matrix. The findings show that although most projects effectively engaged with cultural context and heritage reinterpretation, sensory-driven themes, such as sound, were often treated at a conceptual level rather than translated into technically articulated spatial strategies. This indicates a gap between abstract thematic thinking and architectural resolution. The study contributes to architectural education by proposing a structured analytical framework for evaluating thematic studio outputs and by highlighting the pedagogical challenges of integrating sensory and experiential design approaches into studio practice.

Keywords: Gaziantep, architecture education, sounds of the city, design studio pedagogy, experiential learning, vertical studio structuring

1. Introduction and Contextual Background

Architecture is a discipline that shapes the built environment through spatial thinking, material practice, and cultural interpretation. In this sense, it can be understood as both the production of space and a mode of thinking about the relationships among people, place, and environment (Ciravoğlu, 2001). Architectural education therefore plays a

crucial role in developing the intellectual, perceptual, and creative capacities required for this work. As Erzen (1976) emphasizes, architectural education differs from many other disciplines in its simultaneous engagement of the mind, eye, and hand, encouraging students to develop a holistic mode of thinking that integrates perception, cognition, and action.

In architectural education, the design studio is widely recognized as the primary pedagogical environment where theoretical knowledge and practical skills intersect. It functions as a “learning-by-doing” setting (Koester, 2003) and, in Schön’s (1983) terms, as a reflective practicum in which students construct knowledge through iterative cycles of action, reflection, and revision. This pedagogical structure closely aligns with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, which conceptualizes learning as a continuous cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Consequently, architectural design studios are often understood as learner-centered and process-oriented environments that simulate professional practice while fostering critical inquiry and creative exploration (Oxman, 1990). Accordingly, the studio serves as a simulated environment of professional practice, where students engage with complex, real-world design problems within a structured academic framework.

Contemporary architectural education has increasingly moved beyond conventional problem-solving toward context-responsive and concept-driven pedagogies. In response to growing interest in place, identity, experience, and social engagement, design studios have begun to adopt thematic frameworks that prompt students to explore the cultural, environmental, and sensory dimensions of architecture. These approaches position abstract concepts—including memory, atmosphere, identity, movement, and sensory perception—as generative design drivers rather than supplementary considerations. In doing so, thematic studios aim to cultivate deeper forms of critical thinking, interpretation, and conceptual development while strengthening students’ engagement with context (Salama, 2015; Webster, 2008). Recent reviews further suggest that design studios continue to serve as collaborative learning environments in which reflective practice, peer interaction, and iterative design processes play a central pedagogical role (Hettithanthri & Hansen, 2022).

In parallel, attention has increasingly turned to the experiential and sensory dimensions of architectural education. The growing recognition of architecture as a multisensory experience has prompted educators to explore design approaches that engage not only visual perception but also the auditory, tactile, and atmospheric qualities of space (Pallasmaa, 2005). From this perspective, sensory-based design pedagogies have emerged as a means of expanding students’ awareness of human experience and place perception. These approaches encourage students to interpret intangible phenomena—including sound, memory, movement, and atmosphere—as catalysts for architectural thinking and spatial production.

Despite growing interest in thematic, experiential, and sensory-oriented studio approaches, significant gaps persist in the literature. Existing studies primarily focus on studio culture, reflective learning, creativity, and design processes, whereas relatively few examine how abstract conceptual themes are translated into architectural form, spatial organization, and programmatic relationships. Sensory-driven themes such as sound have received limited attention in architectural education research, despite their potential to enrich the perceptual and experiential dimensions of design. Furthermore, although vertical studio models have been recognized for their capacity to support peer learning, collaborative knowledge production, and interaction across academic levels (Dutton, 1987; Nicol & Pilling, 2000), empirical studies investigating how such environments contribute to thematic design development remain scarce.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating a vertical architectural design studio, the Academy of Art and Performance, located in Gaziantep, Türkiye. Structured around a thematic and context-based pedagogical framework, the studio integrated second- and third-year architecture students and explored the relationship between architecture, performance, cultural identity, and sensory experience. The central design theme, “sound,” was employed as a conceptual driver through

which students interpreted urban rhythms, cultural practices, craft traditions, and sensory experiences. Situated within the historically layered and culturally rich context of Gaziantep, the studio encouraged students to develop architectural responses informed by both tangible and intangible dimensions of place.

Using a qualitative design-based research methodology, this study analyzes nine student projects with a structured thematic evaluation framework. The research investigates how abstract conceptual drivers are interpreted, translated into spatial strategies, and integrated with contextual conditions throughout the design process. In doing so, the study contributes to the architectural education literature in three ways. First, it proposes a systematic analytical framework for evaluating thematic design studio outputs. Second, it critically examines the relationship between conceptual thinking and spatial resolution in student design work. Third, it reflects on the pedagogical opportunities and limitations of sensory-driven and context-based studio approaches within a vertical learning environment.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework and research methodology. Section 3 details the studio structure and design process. Section 4 analyzes the student projects using the proposed thematic framework. Finally, Section 5 discusses the findings, reflects on their pedagogical implications, and presents the study's conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework & Methodology

2.1. Educational Paradigm

The studio's pedagogical structure is grounded in theories of experiential learning and reflective practice, which conceptualize design as an iterative, knowledge-producing process. According to Schön (1983), design studios function as “reflective practicums” where students learn through cycles of action and reflection-in-action, continuously evaluating and reformulating their design decisions. Similarly, Kolb (1984)'s experiential learning

model frames learning as a cyclical process integrating concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Within this framework, the design studio is understood not merely as a space for producing architectural solutions but as a structured environment for developing critical thinking, interpretive skills, and situated knowledge. The emphasis on iterative processes, feedback loops, and studio critiques enables students to test and refine ideas while engaging with complex contextual conditions. In this sense, the studio functions as a microcosm of professional practice, in which design knowledge emerges from the interplay between conceptual thinking and real-world constraints.

2.2. Thematic and Sensory-Based Design Approach

The studio adopts a thematic design approach centered on “sound” as both a sensory and cultural driver. In contemporary architectural education, thematic design frameworks are increasingly used to encourage students to engage with abstract concepts and transform them into spatial propositions. Rather than approaching design solely through functional requirements, thematic studios employ conceptual drivers—such as memory, identity, atmosphere, movement, or sensory perception—to stimulate critical inquiry and foster deeper engagement with place and experience (Salama, 2015; Webster, 2008). Recent discussions on architectural pedagogy further argue that contemporary design studios increasingly rely on conceptual and experiential frameworks to foster critical engagement with complex social and spatial conditions (Deamer, 2020). Furthermore, recent reviews suggest that design studios continue to function as collaborative learning environments where reflective practice, peer interaction, and iterative design processes play a central pedagogical role (Hettithanthri & Hansen, 2022).

In this context, sensory experience has emerged as a key dimension of architectural design and education. Pallasmaa (2005) argues that

architecture should be understood as a multisensory phenomenon that extends beyond visual perception to include auditory, tactile, and atmospheric experiences. Similarly, Schafer's (1977) concept of the "soundscape" highlights the role of sound in shaping environmental perception and urban identity. More recent discussions have reinforced the importance of sensory engagement in architectural learning, suggesting that integrating sensory awareness into design processes can broaden students' understanding of human experience and spatial perception.

Building on these perspectives, the studio frames sound not merely as an acoustic condition but as a conceptual and generative design tool. Students are encouraged to interpret urban sounds, rhythms, cultural practices, and performative activities as potential spatial drivers. Rather than directly reproducing acoustic phenomena, the design process explores how auditory experiences may inform architectural concepts, circulation systems, formal organizations, material expressions, and spatial atmospheres.

Using sound as a thematic framework is particularly relevant in Gaziantep, where cultural identity is expressed through diverse sensory experiences, including traditional music, artisan production, market activities, and everyday urban life. Students were therefore encouraged to investigate both tangible and intangible aspects of the city and translate these observations into architectural strategies. In this sense, sound served as a medium for exploring and representing the broader cultural, social, and experiential dimensions of place.

By integrating a sensory-based theme with contextual analysis and programmatic requirements, the studio sought to establish a design process in which abstract concepts and practical design considerations developed in tandem. This approach provided a framework for examining how students interpreted thematic ideas and translated them into architectural outcomes, which became one of the central analytical concerns of this study.

2.3. Context-Based Learning and Site Integration

The pedagogical framework is further supported by a context-based learning approach that emphasizes integrating architectural design with its physical, cultural, and environmental settings. As Salama (2015) notes, design studios should foster awareness of societal and environmental conditions, enabling students to engage with real-world complexities.

The selected site in Gaziantep offers a rich context marked by historical continuity, craft traditions, and dense urban morphology. Students are required to analyze urban patterns, climate, circulation networks, and cultural practices, and to incorporate these parameters into their design proposals. This approach aligns with Till (2009)'s argument that architecture is inherently contingent on external conditions and that engaging with these conditions enhances both the realism and the pedagogical value of design education.

2.4. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, design-based research methodology, which is particularly suited to examining learning environments where knowledge is generated through iterative design, reflection, and evaluation processes (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). This approach is well-suited to examining educational environments where knowledge is generated through iterative processes of design, reflection, and evaluation.

The study is conducted within a vertical studio structure comprising second- and third-year architecture students. This configuration enables cross-level interaction, peer learning, and the exchange of diverse design perspectives, contributing to a richer pedagogical environment. The primary data set comprises nine completed student projects, supported by studio documentation, including design drawings, physical and digital models, interim and final jury evaluations, and instructor observations.

2.5. Analytical Procedure and Evaluation Criteria

The analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative thematic analysis approach, which provides a systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns in qualitative data. The analytical process was conducted in three consecutive stages.

In the first stage, all student projects and associated studio outputs—including architectural drawings, physical and digital models, interim and final jury presentations, and instructor observations—underwent systematic review. This initial review aimed to identify recurring conceptual, spatial, and contextual strategies that emerged throughout the studio process.

In the second stage, an open coding procedure was used to identify key design characteristics evident across the projects. These preliminary codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories through an axial coding process. The resulting themes were developed through an iterative comparison of the studio's pedagogical objectives with the observed design tendencies in the student projects. This process led to the establishment of five analytical themes: (1) Dialogue with Urban and Cultural Context, (2) Sound-Based Conceptualization and Sensory Space Production, (3) Integration of Production, Performance, and Education, (4) Form, Morphology, and Spatial Organization, and (5) Heritage Reinterpretation: Craft, Material, and Identity.

In the third stage, each project was examined comparatively across these thematic categories. Rather than assigning numerical scores, the analysis focused on identifying the presence, intensity, and modes of manifestation of thematic design strategies within each project. This qualitative approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns, similarities, and differences across the studio outputs while preserving the complexity and diversity of individual design responses.

The coding and evaluation process was conducted by the two studio instructors, who

supervised the design studio throughout the semester, together with the research assistant who participated in studio activities. The evaluation was informed not only by the final project submissions but also by the continuous review process carried out during the fifteen-week studio. During fourteen weeks of the semester, students received weekly desk critiques, and one week was devoted to an interim jury review. The studio concluded with a final jury evaluation. This continuous review process enabled the teaching team to observe the conceptual, formal, and spatial development of each project throughout the design process, rather than evaluating only the final outcomes.

Both the interim and final jury reviews, in addition to the two studio instructors and the research assistant, involved three invited external reviewers who provided independent professional perspectives. These reviewers included an academic from another university's Department of Architecture, a senior architect from the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change with extensive experience in architectural project evaluation, and a practicing architect leading a professional architectural design office. Their comments and critiques served as an additional source of evidence and were incorporated into the analytical process alongside the studio observations.

After the studio concluded, the two instructors and the research assistant independently reviewed the nine projects using the five analytical themes developed for this research. The preliminary thematic classifications were then compared and discussed until a shared interpretation was reached for each project. The analysis drew on multiple sources of evidence, including project drawings, physical and digital models, desk critique observations, interim and final jury feedback, and studio documentation. This iterative consensus-building process, together with triangulation across multiple evaluators and multiple sources of evidence, enhanced the consistency, credibility, and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis.

Finally, a comparative evaluation matrix was developed to synthesize the findings across all nine projects. This matrix enabled the systematic comparison of thematic relationships among the projects and provided the basis for the cross-project analysis presented in the following section.

3. Studio Structure and Design Process

This section outlines the design studio's structure and implementation, providing the operational context for the analytical framework presented in the following sections. Rather than merely describing the studio process, this section highlights how the design process stages aligned with the study's thematic and evaluative criteria.

3.1. Vertical Studio Structuring

In line with these pedagogical mandates, the “Academy of Art and Performance” studio was established as a combined second-year and third-year vertical studio (Studio IV and Studio VI) to develop core design skills across different levels and foster a collaborative learning environment. This vertical structure allowed students at various year levels to work on the same project theme and site, requiring them to manage interconnected relationships among concept, form, scale, spatial

organization, and contextual data in a shared setting.

The project focused on a mixed-use cultural program -an Academy of Art and Performance- located within a compelling real-world context. Additionally, the studio methodology intentionally incorporated a theme or abstract concept (such as “Reflections through Gaziantep” or “Sound of Cities”) alongside functional requirements.

The parallel structure of Studio IV and Studio VI, working within the same site context but with different program scopes (Table 1), enabled shared foundational knowledge while preserving distinct technical challenges. For example, Studio VI students faced significant structural and acoustic demands for the large multipurpose halls (approximately 8500 m²), whereas Studio IV students focused on the tangible integration and material details of the Art Workshops and Exhibition Venues (about 3500 m²). The expectation was that third-year students would address more complex programmatic and technical issues, while second-year students focused on smaller-scale interventions. Both groups benefited from cross-level interactions, such as peer learning and mentorship.

Table 1. Expectations of Studio IV and VI

Category	ARCH 202 (Studio IV)	ARCH 302 (Studio VI)	Differentiation Rationale
Programatic Focus	Workshops, Exhibition Hall, Café-restaurants	Workshops of Academy of Art and Performance, Multipurpose Halls, Other spaces	Framework complexity appropriate to academic maturity and testing design across different scales
Approximate Scale	approx 3500 m ² (Localized, Tangible Integration)	approx 8500 m ² (High Structural)	Managing technical demands inherent in performance typologies (e.g., long spans, specialized mechanical systems)
Core Skill Emphasis	Contextual Insertion, Material Interfaces, Embodied Knowledge	Acoustic/Structural Performance, Complex Circulation, High Urban Significance	Developing specialized knowledge respective to course level and future professional demands

This structure fostered a collaborative peer-learning environment. Activities such as site analysis reviews enabled third-year students to deepen their core understanding by explaining concepts to their juniors, while second-year students gained vital exposure to advanced problem-solving methods and expectations. This cross-pollination greatly contributed to a studio culture spanning year levels, fostering a shared commitment to the project's thematic and contextual aims. This vertical structure not only supported peer learning but also enabled observation of how thematic design approaches were interpreted differently across academic levels, providing an important basis for comparative analysis in this study.

3.2. Site Selection Criteria and Site Analysis Phase

The selection of the project site in Gaziantep was central to the studio's pedagogical strategy. Located in the Mithatpaşa District, the site is immediately adjacent to a historically and culturally significant area that houses the well-known Zeugma Mosaic Museum. As a city with a rich Silk Road history and a vibrant cultural identity, Gaziantep provided a meaningful context for engagement, demanding solutions attuned to local culture, climate, and urban density. Gaziantep's long history has been shaped by the continuous influence of different civilizations. From early times, the city was founded as a defensive settlement, with the area around the Citadel developing into the main urban center (Sönmez, 2018). Under the Ottoman Empire, Gaziantep was an important regional hub, and its urban layout grew along major trade routes. The street system often developed organically, while public buildings—such as neighborhoods and mosques—served as key points of social and cultural life (Hıdıroğlu, 2019).

The main design goal, clearly outlined in the syllabus, was to integrate the new cultural facility into the existing city fabric. This required a thoughtful, site-sensitive design approach that considered the built environment, climate, culture, urban life, and mobility. To ensure this contextual integration, the studio process mandated a thorough Preliminary

Phase, beginning with extensive research. This research component, outlined in the Preparatory Stage, tasked students with gathering essential data by studying the site's physical, geographical, environmental, historical, and cultural features. Key parameters for examination included: solid-void ratios, sun orientation, prevailing winds, urban density, pedestrian and vehicle traffic, historical building functions, cultural characteristics, traditional building materials, typical building types, and major urban landmarks. The aim was for students to analyze this data and develop specific references to guide their subsequent architectural decisions.

These site analysis parameters later informed the evaluation of projects under the theme of "Dialogue with Urban and Cultural Context," allowing for a systematic assessment of how contextual data was translated into design decisions.

3.3. The Design Process Conducted in the Studio

This phase was required to be a three-step, sequential process designed to ensure that all later stages were grounded in both concept and context (Table 2). This organized approach provided essential methodological clarity for students navigating the project's complexity.

Stage 1: Integration of Concept and Theme to the Project (Weeks 1-3)

The initial stage focused on expressing the abstract idea or theme in a tangible way. Students were expected to gather information and reflect on what the concept—for example, "Reflections from Gaziantep through Sounds of Cities"—evoked in their minds. The abstract idea was internalized, and students examined how it might transform when translated into spatial form. This exercise encouraged students to move beyond the immediately visible context and connect architecture to the intangible qualities of place, such as rhythms or sensory patterns. This conceptual framework provided a unique thematic narrative thread to guide subsequent design work. This stage directly informed the evaluation of "Sound-Based Conceptualization," as students' initial

interpretations of the theme formed the basis for assessing conceptual depth and abstraction.

Stage 2: Visualization of the Project in the Given Context (Site) (Weeks 1-4)

The second stage involved thorough site research, emphasizing the location's physical, geographic, environmental, historical, and cultural features. This process included gathering detailed data on the key factors mentioned earlier, such as sun orientation, urban density, and traditional typologies. A vital part of this stage was the three-day field trip to Gaziantep (Week 4). This hands-on learning experience enabled students to conduct firsthand analysis—measuring, sketching, observing traffic patterns, and feeling the climate—which helped turn theoretical site details into practical realities. Listening to the city's sounds along the route planned for the field trip, in relation to the studio theme, is an important process for exploring the sounds that

Gaziantep will evoke in students' memories. The findings from this stage were later used to assess projects under the theme of contextual integration, particularly in relation to urban morphology, cultural references, and environmental responsiveness.

Stage 3: Functional Diagramming and Figuring out Spatial Relationships (Weeks 5-6)

In the third stage, students were required to develop a functional diagram for their assigned building type. This bubble diagram analyzed the hierarchical relationships among spaces, noting direct/indirect, or strong and weak/weak connections. It also examined the public-private nature of each space and estimated their spatial hierarchy in terms of scale and area requirements. By requiring students to actively "figure out the architectural program" from functional categories rather than a fixed syllabus, the studio ensured that programming

Table 2. *The design process conducted in the Studio*

Design Stage	Focus/Content	Key Output	Pedagogical Objective	Related Evaluation Theme(s)
Stage 1: Concept and Theme Development (Weeks 1-3)	Interpretation of abstract theme (e.g., sound, reflection); development of conceptual narrative	Concept diagrams, thematic mappings, initial design intentions	Encouraging conceptual thinking and abstraction beyond visual/formal biases	Sound-Based Conceptualization and Sensory Space Production
Stage 2: Site Analysis and Contextual Research (Weeks 1-4)	Analysis of physical, cultural, environmental, and urban parameters; field observations	Site analysis reports (sun, wind, circulation, density), contextual references	Developing contextual awareness and grounding design decisions in real-world conditions	Dialogue with Urban and Cultural Context
Stage 3: Functional Programming and Spatial Relationships (Weeks 5-6)	Definition of programmatic requirements; spatial hierarchy and relationships	Bubble diagrams, functional zoning schemes, area calculations	Understanding architectural programming as a generative design process	Integration of Production, Performance, and Education; Form and Spatial Organization
Stage 4: Design Development and Spatial Resolution (Weeks 7-14)	Translation of concept and data into architectural form; refinement of spatial organization	Plans, sections, models, final project proposals	Integrating conceptual, contextual, and functional inputs into coherent architectural solutions	Form, Morphology, and Spatial Organization; Heritage Reinterpretation

was understood as a generative design act, developing crucial professional skills in justifying spatial logic and calculating area requirements based on conceptual goals. This stage contributed to the evaluation of “Integration of Production, Performance, and Education” and “Spatial Organization” by revealing how students structured functional relationships and programmatic hierarchies.

This structured process establishes a clear relationship between the studio's pedagogical stages and the analytical framework used in this study. Each stage contributes to specific evaluative dimensions, ensuring that the design process is not only pedagogically coherent but also analytically traceable.

Stage 4: The Design Phase (Weeks 7-14)

After completing the previous phases, students advanced to the Design Phase, where they focused on integrating conceptual ideas (Stage 1), gathering data (Stage 2), and developing functional diagrams (Stage 3). The goal was to develop the skill of expressing architectural ideas through design. Refinement was guided by exploring established architectural concepts, including harmony/contrast, rhythm, horizontality/verticality, transparency/opacity, symmetry/asymmetry, and centralized/decentralized compositions. This systematic exploration encouraged students to balance functional needs with aesthetic considerations within a comprehensive design approach. The design phase served as the primary basis for evaluating form and morphology, and for translating conceptual ideas into spatial configurations.

4. Analysis of the Projects

4.1. Project Evaluation Themes

Nine projects created in this studio were selected and evaluated based on five key themes. These themes are:

- Dialogue with Urban and Cultural Context
- Sound-Based Conceptualization and Sensory Space Production
- Integration of Production, Performance, and Education

- Form, Morphology, and Spatial Organization

- Heritage Reinterpretation: Craft, Material, and Identity

Within this theme, projects are assessed based on their connection to Gaziantep's historical fabric, craft culture, and urban mobility.

Dialogue with Urban and Cultural Context

The cultural and historical context is seen as a key factor that shapes not only the physical environment but also social memory, continuity, and identity formation in contemporary architectural practice. Norberg-Schulz's concept of “genius loci” explains how space's relationship with place is defined; according to this, architecture derives meaning through its interaction with the city's topography, cultural layers, and traditional production methods (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Lefebvre's theory of space highlights that urban environments are shaped not just by physical forms but also through social and perceptual dimensions (Lefebvre, 1991). In complex cities like Gaziantep, design strategies that create a new connection between traditional fabric and modern additions—incorporating cultural elements such as craftsmanship, trade, gastronomy, and music—strengthen this dialogue. Therefore, students' projects evolve into more than mere design objects; they serve as cultural interfaces that reinterpret urban continuity.

In this study, this theme is evaluated through three criteria:

- (1) integration with the existing urban fabric,
- (2) response to mobility and circulation networks, and
- (3) reinterpretation of cultural and historical references.

Sound-Based Conceptualization and Sensory Space Production

The production of spaces based on sensory experience has recently become an important topic in architectural theory. According to Pallasmaa, architecture is more than just a visual practice; auditory, tactile, and olfactory elements are essential parts of the overall spatial experience (Pallasmaa, 2005). Schafer's

concept of “soundscape” suggests that urban sounds can be incorporated into design as a key part of identity (Schafer, 1977). Sound influences architecture both as a conceptual starting point and as a guiding factor in spatial organization. Traditional instrument making in Gaziantep, the sound of water, the hustle of the bazaar, and auditory traditions specific to the culinary culture have enabled students to incorporate sound as an architectural element in their work. As a result, these projects create a sensory unity that reflects not only “auditory perception” but also the space's cultural rhythm and experiential intensity.

The evaluation is based on three criteria:

- (1) the conceptual use of sound (metaphorical or literal),
- (2) its translation into spatial or formal strategies, and
- (3) the degree of technical articulation, including acoustic awareness or performative spatial design.

Integration of Production, Performance, and Education

This theme examines how projects spatially organize and interrelate three core functions of the academy: production (workshops and making spaces), performance (stages and exhibition areas), and education (classrooms and learning environments). Rather than treating these as discrete programmatic components, the focus is on integrating them into a continuous, interactive spatial system.

The theoretical basis of this integration can be associated with experiential learning approaches, particularly Kolb (1984)'s emphasis on learning through action, as well as Sennett (2008)'s notion of craftsmanship as a socially embedded and publicly visible process. In architectural terms, this suggests a shift from isolated functional zoning toward spatial configurations that enable visibility, interaction, and process-based continuity.

In this context, the integration of production, performance, and education is understood as a spatial manifestation of a process-based learning cycle, where making, exhibiting, and

learning occur in overlapping or sequential relationships. This may be achieved through strategies such as visual permeability between spaces, shared circulation systems, or the positioning of performance areas as extensions of production environments.

For this study, this theme is evaluated through three criteria:

- (1) the degree of spatial continuity between production, performance, and educational functions,
- (2) the visibility and accessibility of production processes within public or semi-public areas, and
- (3) the extent to which performance and exhibition spaces are integrated into everyday learning environments rather than treated as isolated components.

Form, Morphology, and Spatial Organization

The creation of architectural form is not just an aesthetic choice, but rather the outcome of a comprehensive assessment of factors such as function, context, circulation, and experience. Leach (1997) contends that form in contemporary architecture develops in relation to concepts, processes, and context. Hillier and Hanson's spatial pattern theory, however, demonstrates that spatial organization influences social relationships (Hillier & Hanson, 1984). The axial compositions, cyclical planning, topography-following mass fragmentation, internal courtyards, and open or semi-open spatial continuities observed in student projects serve as practical equivalents to these theoretical frameworks. In this context, the projects illustrate how form transforms into a morphological strategy rooted in a conceptual foundation.

The evaluation is based on:

- (1) the clarity of circulation and spatial hierarchy,
- (2) the relationship between conceptual ideas and formal expression, and
- (3) the overall coherence of morphological and spatial strategies.

Heritage Reinterpretation: Craft, Material, and Identity

This theme examines how projects engage with both tangible and intangible dimensions of cultural heritage, including craft traditions, material practices, and collective identity. Theoretical perspectives on heritage provide an important framework for this evaluation. While Ruskin (1849) emphasizes the preservation of cultural heritage through continuity and respect for existing values, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1854-68) advocates for creative reinterpretation as a means of sustaining heritage within contemporary contexts. In parallel, UNESCO highlights the role of practices such as crafts, music, dance, and cuisine in shaping collective identity and cultural continuity (UNESCO, 2003).

Within this framework, the projects developed in the Gaziantep context frequently draw upon local craft traditions—such as copperwork, woodwork, ceramics, and folk music—as

sources of spatial and material inspiration. These references are not treated merely as symbolic elements but are translated into architectural strategies that reflect processes of making, material expression, and cultural narratives. For this study, this theme is evaluated through three criteria:

- (1) the integration of material and construction references derived from local craft traditions,
- (2) the reinterpretation of intangible cultural practices within spatial and programmatic organization, and
- (3) the extent to which cultural identity is translated into coherent architectural expression.

4.2. Description of the Projects

The following section provides a descriptive overview of the nine student projects, focusing on their conceptual frameworks, spatial organizations, and programmatic configurations:



Figure 1. Project 1 – Perform Inn: concept diagram, 3D view, ground-floor plan, and section.

Project 1- Perform Inn (Figure 1): The project is located in the historic city center of Gaziantep and uses the traditional khan typology as its primary conceptual framework. Urban flow, bazaar culture, and artisan activities inform the proposal's spatial organization. The design is structured around a circular grid that organizes workshops, educational spaces, public areas, and an amphitheater. The theme of sound is expressed through rhythmic movement and circulation patterns. Production, education, and performance functions are arranged within an interconnected spatial system. The project incorporates elements of the khan typology within a contemporary cultural facility.

Project 2- Cul-Vo (Figure 2): The project is based on the concept of “cultural evolution” and incorporates references to Gaziantep’s copper-craftsmanship tradition. Sounds associated with craftsmanship and production processes are integral to the conceptual framework. The program includes spaces for craft production, education, exhibition, and social interaction. A

cyclical relationship among these functions is established through circulation and spatial organization. The design employs an organic, continuous formal language derived from the project's conceptual approach. References to traditional copper craftsmanship are reflected in the architectural concept and spatial composition.

Project 3- The Melody of Water (Figure 3): The project draws on Gaziantep’s water resources, climatic conditions, and water-related cultural practices. Water serves as a central architectural element in the proposal and is integrated into both the spatial organization and the conceptual framework. The program combines instrument production, music education, and performance activities. Water elements are integrated with circulation routes and open spaces, and linear transitions guide movement throughout the project. Water culture and the sound of water are treated as components of the project's spatial and experiential structure.

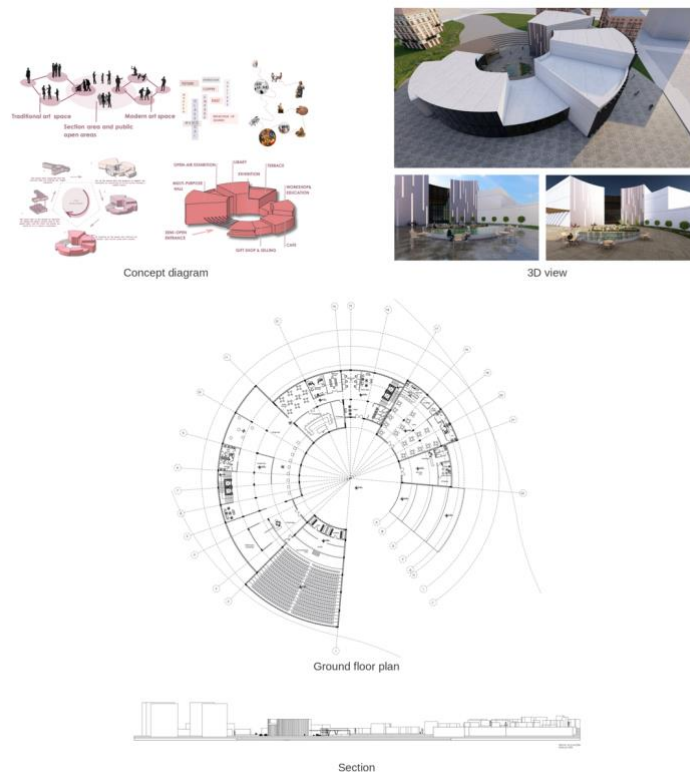


Figure 2. Project 2 – Cul-Vo: concept diagram, 3D view, ground-floor plan, and section.



Figure 3. *Project 3 - The Melody of Water: concept diagram, 3D view, ground-floor plan, and section.*

Project 4- Walking Sounds (Figure 4): The project is organized around three thematic components: gastronomy, music, and craft production. The design incorporates two courtyards connected by circulation routes and shared public spaces. Gastronomy and music are positioned as parallel production domains within the overall program. Educational, production, performance, and participatory learning functions are distributed throughout the complex. The project uses a curved mass configuration and a double-courtyard organizational scheme. Spaces associated with Gaziantep's gastronomy, music, and craft culture are integrated into the architectural program.

Project 5- Making sense of human labor with folk melodies (Figure 5): The project draws on characteristics of Gaziantep's traditional residential culture, including courtyard spaces,

inward-oriented living patterns, and light-shadow relationships. The design uses multiple levels, ramps, and sloping surfaces as primary organizational elements. Circulation routes connect educational, production, and exhibition functions through a continuous spatial sequence. Light and shadow serve as recurring design elements throughout the project. Topographical variations and sloping surfaces are integrated into the architectural composition, while references to traditional housing appear in the façade design and spatial organization.

Project 6- Axial Construction (Figure 6): The project focuses on the sociocultural structure of Gaziantep, with particular attention to youth participation in cultural activities. Music education and auditory experiences form the

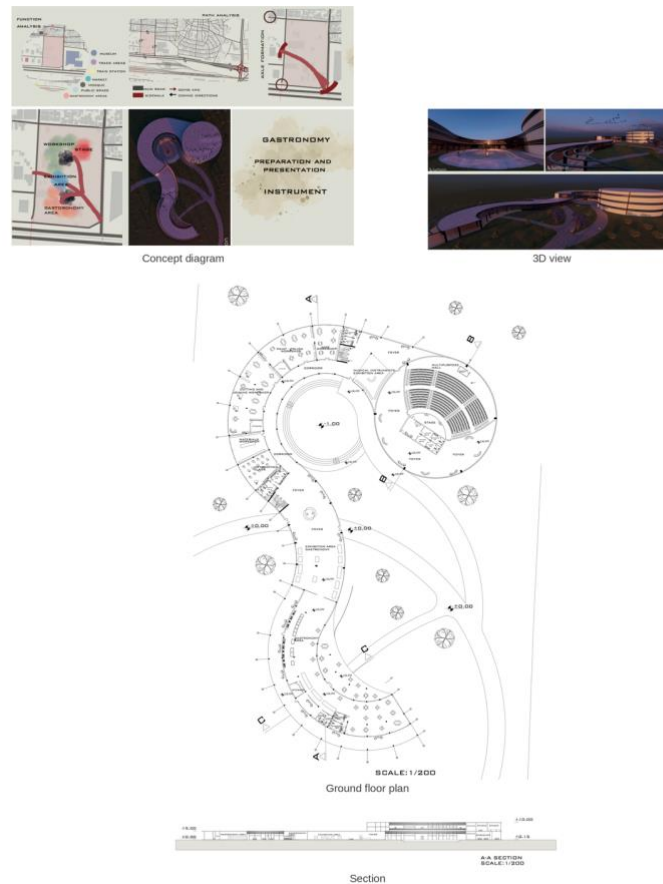


Figure 4. Project 4 – Walking Sounds: concept diagram, 3D view, ground-floor plan, and section.

proposal's primary conceptual framework. The program includes conservatory facilities, educational spaces, production areas, and performance venues. A cyclical organizational scheme structures circulation and spatial relationships throughout the project. Spaces for cultural production, learning, and performance are arranged within an education-oriented architectural framework. References to youth culture and cultural participation are integrated into the project's programmatic organization.

Project 7 - Spin of Sounds (Figure 7): The project focuses on the sociocultural structure of Gaziantep, with particular attention to youth participation in cultural activities. Music education and auditory experiences form the proposal's primary conceptual framework. The program includes conservatory facilities, educational spaces, production areas, and performance venues. A cyclical organizational scheme structures circulation and spatial

relationships throughout the project. Spaces for cultural production, learning, and performance are arranged within an education-oriented architectural framework. References to youth culture and cultural participation are integrated into the project's programmatic organization.

Project 8- Earthen Melodies (Figure 8): The project draws on pottery and earthenware traditions associated with Gaziantep's cultural heritage. The Art and Music Academy includes spaces for craft production, education, exhibition, and performance. Earthenware instruments, such as the *darbuka* and *ney*, are integral to the project's conceptual framework. The spatial organization follows a sequence that connects production, exhibition, and performance processes. Pottery-making processes inform the proposal's organizational structure, while earthenware serves as a material, educational, and conceptual reference throughout the project.

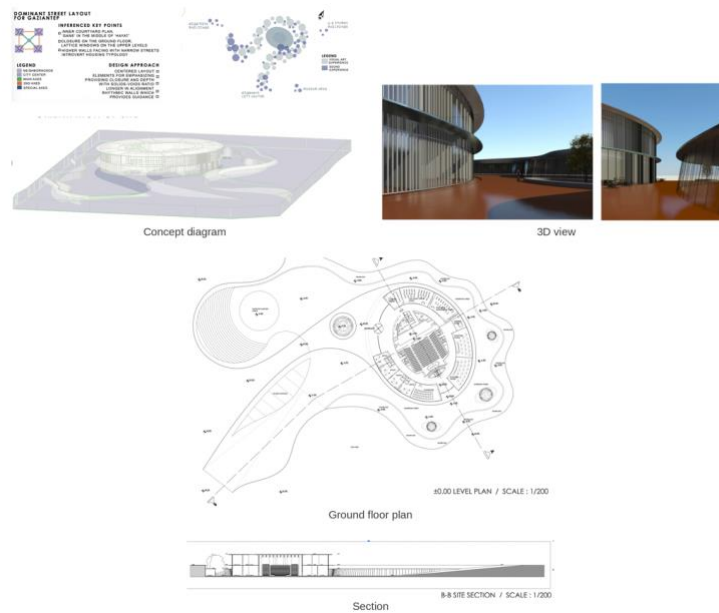


Figure 5. Project 5 – Making Sense of Human Labor with Folk Melodies: concept diagram, 3D view, ground-floor plan, and section.

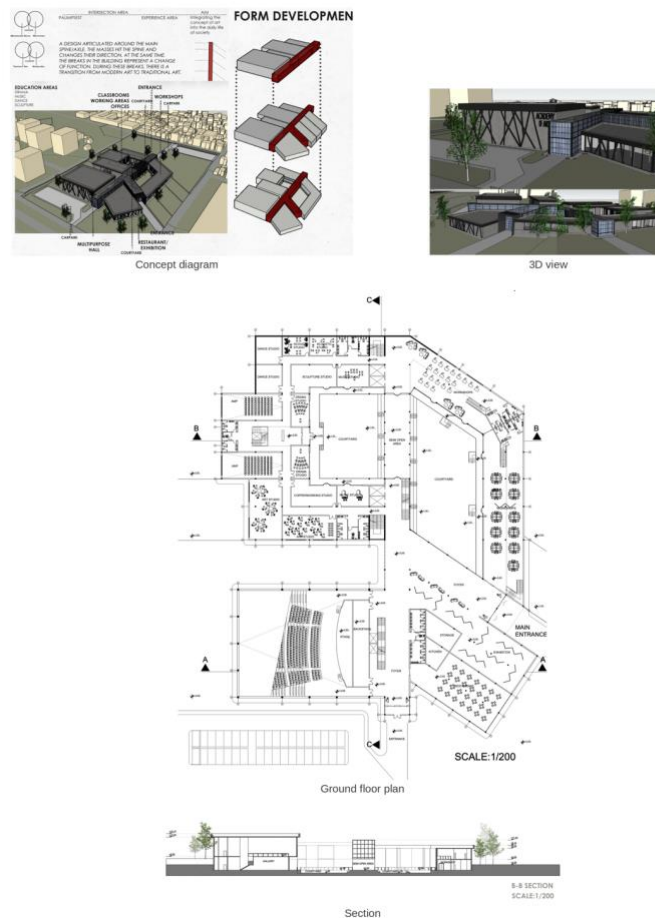


Figure 6. Project 6 – Axial Construction: concept diagram, 3D view, ground-floor plan, and section.

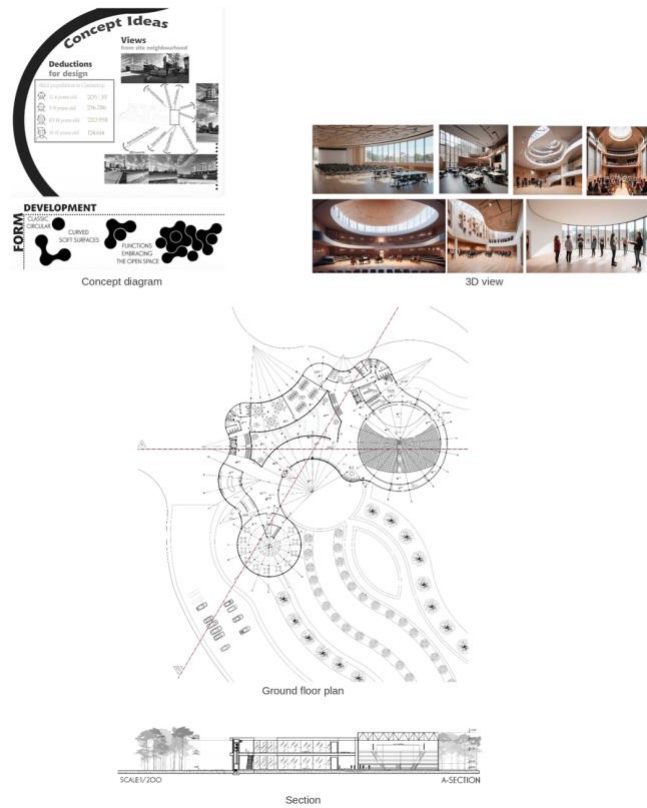


Figure 7. Project 7 – Spin of Sounds: concept diagram, 3D view, ground-floor plan, and section.

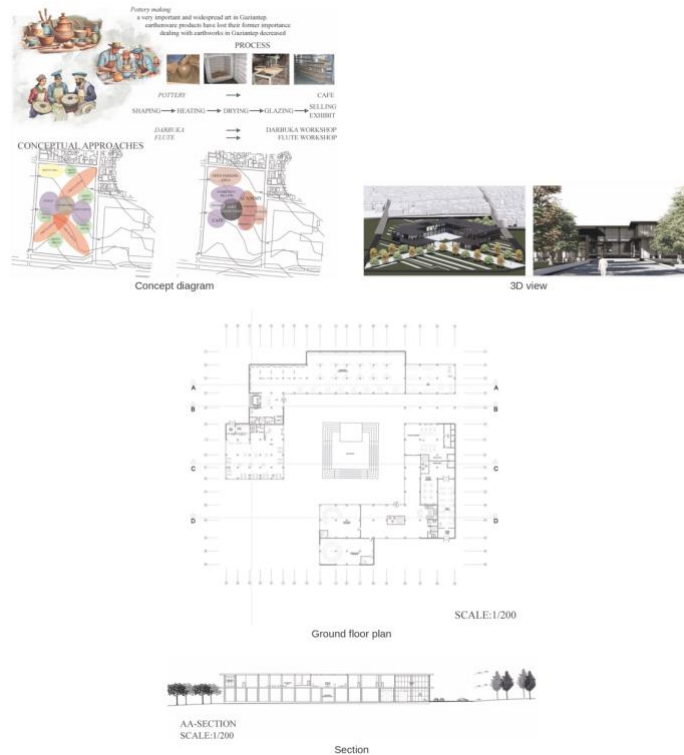


Figure 8. Project 8 – Earthen Melodies: concept diagram, 3D view, ground-floor plan, and section.

Project 9 - Efficient Learning Axis (Figure 9): Located adjacent to the Zeugma Mosaic Museum, the project is organized around a primary spatial axis that structures circulation and functional relationships. The program integrates production, education, and performance activities related to art and music. References to local cultural practices, including folk dances, coppersmithing, and woodworking, inform the conceptual framework. Motifs from these traditions appear in the plan organization, façade composition, and spatial arrangement. Educational, production, and performance functions are distributed along the main axis and linked by shared circulation spaces. Folk dance and craft motifs are translated into formal and surface-based architectural elements.

4.3. Comparative Analysis of Thematic Design Approaches

To provide a transparent and systematic basis for the cross-project comparison discussed below, Table 3 maps all nine projects against the five thematic design approaches, indicating the qualitative mode of engagement observed for each project–theme pairing (Table 3).

4.3.1. Dialogue with Urban and Cultural Context

All nine projects engaged with Gaziantep's urban and cultural context; however, the depth and mode of this engagement varied significantly. Projects such as Perform Inn and Walking Sounds established strong physical and programmatic connections with the surrounding urban fabric by integrating circulation flows, public interfaces, and references to bazaar culture. These projects can



Figure 9. Project 9 – Efficient Learning Axis: concept diagram, 3D view, ground-floor plan, and section.

be categorized as spatially integrated approaches, in which contextual data directly informed layout and accessibility.

In contrast, projects like Efficient Learning Axis and Axial Construction adopted a more abstract interpretive approach, translating cultural layers and urban patterns into formal and compositional strategies rather than direct physical integration. While these approaches successfully referenced cultural identity, they occasionally lacked a strong connection to everyday urban dynamics, particularly in terms of pedestrian continuity and public engagement. This comparison suggests that while contextual awareness was consistently present, its translation into spatial strategies ranged from direct integration to symbolic abstraction, indicating different levels of operationalization of contextual data.

4.3.2. Sound-Based Conceptualization and Sensory Space Production

The theme of sound, as a central conceptual driver of the studio, was widely adopted across the projects; however, its interpretation varied in depth and technical resolution. Projects such as The Melody of Water and Earthen Melodies demonstrated a multisensory approach, in which sound was not only conceptualized but also embedded within spatial sequences through water elements, material choices, and experiential transitions. These projects represent a performative translation of sound, in which auditory concepts informed both atmosphere and spatial organization.

In contrast, most projects employed sound at a metaphorical level, using rhythm, repetition, or movement as abstract representations without fully translating these ideas into measurable acoustic or spatial systems. For instance, projects such as Spin of Sounds and Making Sense of Human Labor with Folk Melodies used sound-inspired narratives but remained technically limited.

This highlights a clear distinction between the conceptual adoption and the spatial implementation of sensory themes. Although the thematic intention was widely understood,

the ability to translate sound into architectural performance remained limited, underscoring a gap between abstraction and technical resolution.

4.3.3. Integration of Production, Performance, and Education

One of the most consistently successful aspects across the projects was the integration of production, performance, and education. Most proposals developed spatial sequences that enabled users to experience a continuous cycle of learning, making, and exhibiting. Projects such as Cul-Vo and Walking Sounds demonstrated strong programmatic coherence by organizing workshops, exhibition spaces, and performance areas within interconnected systems.

These projects can be characterized as process-oriented spatial models in which architectural organization reflects the temporal sequence of artistic production. In such cases, the visibility of production processes and the accessibility of performance spaces contributed to a dynamic and participatory spatial experience.

However, in a few projects, these functions remained spatially segregated, resulting in weaker integration and reduced interaction between user groups. This suggests that, while the conceptual understanding of integration was strong, its spatial execution depended heavily on the clarity of the programmatic relationships established in the early design stages.

4.3.4. Form, Morphology, and Spatial Organization

The projects exhibited a wide range of formal strategies, reflecting diverse interpretations of the studio's thematic and contextual framework. Circular, axial, organic, and topography-responsive configurations were evident across the projects, demonstrating a high level of formal exploration.

Projects such as Perform Inn and Spin of Sounds employed cyclical and movement-based morphologies, translating rhythmic concepts into spatial organization. Meanwhile, Axial Construction and Efficient Learning Axis

Table 3. Comparative evaluation matrix of the nine student projects across the five thematic design approaches.

Project	Theme 1 – Urban & Cultural Context	Theme 2 – Sound-Based Conceptualization	Theme 3 – Production, Performance & Education	Theme 4 – Form, Morphology & Spatial Organization	Theme 5 – Heritage Reinterpretation
Project 1 - Perform Inn	Strong — khan typology and bazaar culture directly inform circulation and public interfaces	Metaphorical — rhythm and circulation patterns, not technically resolved	Strong — interconnected spatial system linking workshops, education, and performance	Cyclical, movement-based morphology	Moderate — khan typology referenced
Project 2 - Cul-Vo	Moderate — craft tradition referenced, less direct urban-fabric integration	Metaphorical — craftsmanship sounds inform conceptual framework	Strong — cyclical relationship among production, education, exhibition	Radially shaped massing with curved volumes	Strong — copper craftsmanship central to concept and form
Project 3 - The Melody of Water	Moderate — water resources and climate referenced, limited urban-fabric integration	Performative — water sound embedded in spatial sequence and material choices	Moderate — instrument production, education, performance combined	Parallel fragmented volumes bridged by a perpendicular linear block above ground level	Moderate — water culture as experiential reference
Project 4 - Walking Sounds	Strong — gastronomy and craft culture integrated into public, shared spaces	Metaphorical — sound-inspired narrative, technically limited	Strong — functions distributed and interconnected throughout complex	Twin circular courtyards linked by a sinuous curved spine	Strong — gastronomy, music, craft culture integrated
Project 5 - Making Sense of Human Labor with Folk Melodies	Moderate — traditional residential culture and courtyards referenced	Metaphorical — folk-melody narrative, technically limited	Moderate — continuous sequence linking functions, less detailed	Organic branching form with circular nodes and curved connecting arms	Moderate — traditional housing referenced in façade
Project 6 - Axial Construction	Abstract/symbolic — sociocultural focus, limited physical/ pedestrian integration	Metaphorical — auditory experience as conceptual framework only	Moderate — education-oriented framework, functions arranged but not deeply interlinked	Linear and hierarchical morphology	Moderate — youth culture and participation referenced
Project 7 - Spin of Sounds	Abstract/symbolic — sociocultural focus, limited physical/ pedestrian integration	Metaphorical — sound-inspired narrative, technically limited	Moderate — education-oriented framework, functions arranged but not deeply interlinked	Cyclical, movement-based morphology	Moderate — youth culture and participation referenced
Project 8 - Earthen Melodies	Moderate — pottery heritage referenced, limited urban-fabric integration	Performative — earthenware instruments embedded as material/spatial reference	Strong — sequential connection of production, exhibition, performance	Angular mass surrounding a central courtyard	Strong — pottery and earthenware central to concept and material
Project 9 - Efficient Learning Axis	Abstract/symbolic — adjacent to museum, limited pedestrian/public engagement	Not sound-centered — folk dance and craft motifs used instead	Strong — functions distributed along main axis with shared circulation	Linear and hierarchical morphology	Strong — coppersmithing, woodworking, folk dance motifs translated formally

adopted linear and hierarchical systems, emphasizing order, directionality, and structural clarity.

Despite this diversity, a recurring issue was the disconnect between concept and form in certain projects. While formal gestures were often visually compelling, they did not always maintain a coherent relationship with the underlying conceptual narrative. This suggests that translating abstract ideas into spatial logic remains a critical challenge in design education.

4.3.5. Heritage Reinterpretation: Craft, Material, and Identity

Heritage reinterpretation emerged as the most dominant and consistently developed theme across all projects. Students frequently engaged with Gaziantep's craft traditions—such as copperwork, pottery, gastronomy, and folk music—as primary sources of inspiration.

Projects like Cul-Vo and Earthen Melodies demonstrated material-based reinterpretation, where traditional crafts informed both spatial organization and architectural expression. Others, such as Efficient Learning Axis, adopted a more motif-based approach, translating cultural patterns into façade and plan geometries.

The prevalence of this theme indicates that students tend to rely on tangible cultural references as a design strategy. Compared to more abstract themes such as sound, heritage provided a more accessible and directly translatable framework, resulting in stronger spatial coherence and material articulation.

4.4. Cross-Project Evaluation and Key Findings

A comparative evaluation of the nine projects reveals several overarching patterns. First, heritage reinterpretation and contextual engagement were the most consistently successful themes, indicating students' strong ability to work with tangible cultural and spatial references. Second, although the integration of production, performance, and education was conceptually well understood, its spatial

execution varied with the clarity of programmatic organization.

Most notably, the theme of sound—despite being central to the studio—was predominantly interpreted at a conceptual level rather than translated into technically developed spatial strategies. Only a limited number of projects successfully integrated sound as a performative or measurable architectural element.

This reveals a significant gap between conceptual abstraction and architectural resolution, suggesting that sensory-driven design approaches require additional methodological support, such as acoustic simulation tools or interdisciplinary collaboration.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that while thematic design studios are effective in fostering conceptual thinking and contextual awareness, the translation of abstract ideas into spatial and technical outcomes remains uneven. This highlights the need for more structured frameworks.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate the potential of thematic and context-based design studios to foster conceptual thinking, contextual awareness, and architectural interpretation. Consistent with previous studies that emphasize the educational value of experiential and concept-driven learning environments (Salama, 2015; Webster, 2008), the projects revealed a strong tendency among students to engage with the cultural, historical, and social characteristics of place. Most proposals referenced Gaziantep's urban identity, craft traditions, and cultural practices, suggesting that thematic frameworks can serve as effective mediators between architectural design and local context.

One of the most significant findings concerns the relationship between abstract conceptual themes and their architectural translation. Although all projects adopted sound as a central conceptual driver, only a limited number translated auditory references into explicit spatial, experiential, or performative strategies.

In many cases, sound remained at the level of metaphor, narrative, or formal inspiration rather than becoming an operational architectural parameter. This finding supports broader discussions within architectural pedagogy about the challenges of translating abstract concepts into coherent spatial systems. While concept-driven design approaches encourage creativity and interpretive thinking, they do not automatically guarantee successful architectural resolution. The results therefore suggest that additional pedagogical mechanisms may be required to support the transition from conceptual exploration to spatial articulation.

This observation is particularly relevant to sensory-based design education. Pallasmaa's (2005) theoretical framework emphasizes the multisensory nature of architectural experience, while contemporary pedagogical discussions highlight the value of experiential and sensory learning in design education (Deamer, 2020; Hettithanthri & Hansen, 2022). However, the findings indicate that students often engage more readily with sensory themes at a conceptual level than at a technical or spatial level. As a result, sensory concepts may function primarily as narrative generators unless paired with specific design tools, performance criteria, or spatial evaluation methods. The recurring gap between conceptual adoption and spatial implementation identified in this study illustrates a central pedagogical challenge of sensory-based studio education.

Another important finding concerns the role of the vertical studio structure. Previous studies have suggested that vertical studios foster peer learning, collaborative knowledge production, and the exchange of diverse perspectives (Dutton, 1987; Nicol & Pilling, 2000). This study's findings support these observations. Although all students worked within the same thematic framework and site context, the resulting projects exhibited a wide range of interpretations, formal strategies, and programmatic organizations. Circular, axial, organic, and process-based design approaches emerged simultaneously, indicating that the vertical studio environment encouraged

multiple responses to a shared design problem rather than converging on a single solution. This diversity may be considered a strength of thematic studio pedagogy, as it allows students to develop individual design positions while engaging with common conceptual and contextual parameters.

The analysis also revealed that heritage reinterpretation was the most consistently developed theme across the projects. Compared with the relatively abstract notion of sound, tangible cultural references such as craft traditions, local production practices, folk music, gastronomy, and urban memory were more readily translated into architectural decisions. Students frequently drew on these references to inform spatial organization, material choices, formal configurations, and programmatic structures. This suggests that tangible, culturally embedded themes may offer a more accessible foundation for architectural exploration than highly abstract sensory concepts. The finding further reinforces the importance of context-based learning environments, in which local cultural resources become active components of the design process rather than passive sources of inspiration.

From a methodological perspective, this study advances architectural education research by proposing a structured thematic evaluation framework for analyzing studio outputs. While previous studies have often focused on studio processes, learning experiences, or pedagogical models, fewer have offered systematic methods for examining how conceptual themes are reflected in design outcomes. By combining qualitative thematic analysis with a comparative evaluation matrix, the study provides a replicable framework for investigating the relationship between conceptual intentions and architectural production. In this respect, the research contributes not only to discussions of thematic and sensory-based studio pedagogy but also to the broader assessment of design studio learning environments.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a single studio within a specific cultural and educational context and examines a relatively small number of projects. Furthermore, the findings rely primarily on design outputs and studio documentation rather than on direct student interviews or longitudinal learning assessments. Future research could broaden the scope by comparing different thematic studio models, incorporating student reflections, and examining how sensory-based design approaches influence learning outcomes across diverse educational settings.

Overall, the findings suggest that thematic and sensory-based design studios can offer valuable opportunities for contextual engagement, conceptual development, and creative exploration. However, they also reveal the challenges of translating abstract sensory themes into architecturally articulated solutions. The study therefore highlights both the pedagogical potential and the limitations of thematic studio approaches and offers a structured framework for their future evaluation and development.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the pedagogical structure and design outcomes of a thematic, context-based architectural design studio through a qualitative, design-based research approach. By analyzing nine student projects within a structured thematic framework, the study has explored how abstract conceptual drivers—particularly sound and cultural identity—are interpreted and translated into spatial strategies.

The findings demonstrate that thematic design studios have significant potential to enhance students' conceptual thinking, contextual sensitivity, and engagement with cultural identity. The integration of real-site conditions, sensory themes, and interdisciplinary references creates a rich, dynamic learning environment that reflects the complexity of contemporary architectural practice.

However, the study also reveals important limitations. While students were generally successful in engaging with contextual and cultural dimensions, the translation of abstract concepts into spatially and technically coherent architectural solutions remained uneven. In particular, sensory-driven themes such as sound were often interpreted at a conceptual level without being fully integrated into architectural performance.

These results suggest that future studio models should incorporate more structured analytical and technical tools to support the translation of conceptual ideas into spatial and performative outcomes. Approaches such as acoustic simulation, digital analysis, and interdisciplinary collaboration with fields such as music, performance studies, or sound engineering may enhance the depth and applicability of such thematic explorations.

The study is limited by its focus on a single studio setting and a relatively small sample of projects, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand this work by comparing multiple studio environments, incorporating longitudinal analyses of student development, or integrating post-occupancy evaluations to assess the real-world impact of design decisions.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to architectural education literature by proposing a structured analytical framework for evaluating thematic design studios and by highlighting the opportunities and challenges of integrating sensory and context-based approaches into architectural pedagogy. It underscores the importance of bridging conceptual thinking and architectural resolution, suggesting that the future of design education lies in more integrative, interdisciplinary, and analytically grounded studio models.

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