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Beginning Architecture: Contextualising thresholds in architectural education

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Where do we begin? Architecture is a profession riddled with many orientations, directions, and perspectives. How one favours what to signify in representation is equally open in processes, methodologies and approaches to form-making, spatial ordering, material choices, and so forth. The educational process is similar; it is riddled with conundrum after conundrum. The education of the architect was not unique; it developed through the artists' guilds into academies wishing to elevate the discipline, and the mechanical arts, which was a subset of *armatura*. Carl Goldstein's *Teaching Art* traces not only the growth of academies but the shifting issues with craft and thought, noting that both the disciplinary art and their education were always responsive, and often confrontational.¹ The Florentine academy, which privileged *disegno* over Venetian *colore*, had a responsive curriculum. As soon as the papacy allowed dissections, life drawing and the study of cadavers were not only included, but mandated at the *Accademia del disegno*. The elevation of the arts with European royal support led to what Goldstein refers to as 'triumph of the academy', a consolidation of processes and methods as *de rigueur*, inadvertently creating strict doctrine and prescribing inflexible methods and values.² The response to this was, of course, reactionary, and the dialectical confrontation repeats itself many times, over many decades, as a confrontation between mainstream and avant-garde. Other themes that occur and recur in the academies over the centuries are issues of mimesis and exemplars, the antique, art and science, style, originality, craftsmanship, and in the last two centuries, questions of modernisation, modernism, and modernity. The latter aligns with the territories of contestation: modernisation with process, modernism with establishment, and modernity as condition. In our current climate crisis, political shifts, and recent global pandemic; architectural process, establishment, and conditions are again re-examined.

Beginning Architecture is a threshold experience that has taken on many guises – from benign to radical – within distinct cultural contexts over the centuries. Academic events, like the National Conference for the Beginning Design Student in the United States and conferences of the Association of Architectural Educators in the United Kingdom, attempt to shed light on the first steps that a student takes towards a professional design education. Our concern for spearheading this issue revolves around perennial questions on architectural education beginnings that seem to recur, albeit within different paradigms and contexts, yet seem to eternally return as if, for the first time, having never before been questioned. Of known early writings, Vitruvius began his *Ten Books on Architecture* by firstly discussing the education of the architect; his opening gambit stated that '[t]he architect should be equipped with knowledge of many branches of study and varied kinds of learning'.³ He then goes on to discuss themes of balance between manual skills and scholarship, themes of representation, and *encyclios disciplina*, which transliterated to contemporary times refers to the liberal arts. Despite the increasing commodification of education, the liberal arts formed the basis of civic or professional education then and still do today. The width of concerns, the range of skill sets and mindsets collectively present a conundrum of how one might begin.

The beginning educational context incorporates the introduction of a body of knowledge and the cultivation of design thinking through topics of creation, communication, history, theory, ethics, and the environment. At the same time, a beginning design student navigates a world riddled with complicated realities – anthropological and cultural diversity, climate, vulnerable economies and the politics of communities, inhabitation, and well-being. Underneath, there are traditional aspects of scholarship, studentship, enterprise, and aspiration. Intersecting all of these are developing technologies, radical changes in access to information, and a profession that is ever-evolving its tools, methods, and processes.

This issue of *Charrette* seeks to foreground the beginning stages of architectural education—including themes of information, entrepreneurship, experimentation, and new curricula. How has an instantaneous access to a changing landscape of information changed beginning architecture? Is a student's access to information enabling different kinds of pedagogical experimentation when they start navigating the world of architectural education? Are changes in the architectural field, where entrepreneurship is a necessity, captured in beginning architecture? Are the unit system, the atelier style or the studio format responding to contemporary ways architecture is created? What educational management strategies and organisational platforms are positioned to leverage design thinking and transferable skills? Are studio projects championing individual genius as the best preparation for future professional team working? How should the communication of knowledge take place? Is the traditional in-person lecture format sufficient for the way students gain an understanding of the material? How are courses on building technologies, environmental studies, philosophy, history, ethics, and professional practice, connecting students with the bigger questions confronting architects? Are students prepared for the ethical challenges of the changing world beyond the University? How long should architectural education be? How can it be organised as an efficient and responsive curriculum in the current ecological crisis? How does architectural education respond to diverse community needs and wants? As varied as these probing questions are, they are present in the global context of professional architectural education.

Broadly, three groups hold an interest in these questions. The institutions, the educators, and the professionals collectively probe these concerns as providers of broadly seeking transformational outcomes. The agencies, governing bodies, the public at large, and regulatory boards seek equity, access, and public interest as they address educational management. Prospective students, current and future students, their families, and the communities where architectural education is offered hold aspiration and developmental goals. The matrix of this undertaking between the stakeholders compels a multifaceted measurement in constructing responses. A collection of papers from North America, the United Kingdom, Europe, North Africa, and Australasia herewith probes themes of process, inner

creativity, experimentation, ontology, collaboration, access, and community engagement. We have organised these contributions into three groupings: Ontological Reconsiderations, Unleashing Creativity and Experimentation, and Community and Collaboration

O n t o l o g i c a l r e c o n s i d e r a t i o n s

With an intriguing look into the question of beginnings, Paul Emmons and Mehraneh Davari, from the Washington-Alexandria Architecture Center (WAAC) of Virginia Tech, connect a centuries-long architectural practice – measured drawings that study and record existing models – with contemporary issues of sustainability and circular economy. In ‘First Build then Draw (and repeat)!', they demonstrate how measured drawings can help students understand the relationship between the lines they draw on the paper and the constructed material world. Through this awareness, students can tangibly grasp the importance of repair and reuse in today's architectural world and appreciate the memory, maturity, and ageing beauty that building elements and materials may carry. The authors question the circular economy both ethically and as a metaphor of the architectural process. Is a beginning necessarily linear? Can a student join the cyclic process at any point, assuming the cycle continually revolves as education evolves? Are students not already, on arrival, aware of materials, space, form-making, technology, ethics, representation, and other relevant concerns at some level? Do they already bring not only an outlook and mindset but some skillset as well?⁴

Issues of prior preparation are at the heart of the mind-boggling question of how institutions establish selective criteria in the recruitment of beginning students. Concurrently, educators deal with quickly forging in beginning cohorts a comparable equity of perspectives, manual skill sets, commonality of theoretical knowledge, and awareness; from a range of students whose backgrounds are varied and whose prior encounters with architecture are more than likely touristic. This conundrum of acculturation is recognised by Mark Price of University College Dublin, who uses the analogy of the crucible to conceptualise the crit as the forge in which rituals of symbolic violence are performed by architects to acculturate architecture students. Challenging popular critiques of the crit as psychologically detrimental to beginning architecture students, Price analyses the power dynamics at play in terms of the development of the Lacanian subject. He writes:

[w]hat crits do is ensure certain continuities of meaning and value, not in order to make sure that everyone thinks the same way, but to make sure that differential thinking happens in a certain way [...] that the terms of reference of the discussion are *a priori*, and /or that the range of possible answers is understood in advance, that the methodology of enquiry is pre-determined.⁵

Is the circularity that Emmons and Davari discuss a closed circle? Is not the

initiation into any discipline to acculturate? In an ironic way, the critique itself is a form of measure in learning where the discussion is often *what not to do*, specifically and instructionally, rather than *what to do*, exactly and methodically, with constructive and positive possibilities offered as options, both in practice and in thought. The paper explores many methodologies recorded in the book *Rethinking the Crit*, where much of the dialogue from many educators focus on some form of imagined freedom or parity that the student should possess within the power structures of a critique.⁶

In 'Reconsidering *Becoming an Architect* through an Integration of Learning Lens,' James Thompson of the University of Melbourne calls for educational reform to provide experiences for integration of knowledge that has been heretofore dis-integrated into separate courses focusing on the integration of learning across multiple courses within architectural education through reflective interviews and portfolios. Making a conceptual link between learning and identity, this paper questions the 'hidden curriculum of unspoken values used by educators and employers alike to evaluate the quality of aspiring architects'.⁷ Thompson and Price both identify the conundrum of recognisable qualities which architectural education seeks to inculcate, like the intangible circularity which Emmons and Davari recognise, but all their deliberations confirm that architectural education continues to struggle with clarity and definition in assessment and seemingly still relies heavily on *gestalt*. Advocating support for the intangible, Claudio Sgarbi at Carleton University and Istituto Marangoni questions the necessity of pre-determined study plans, curricula, and bureaucratic accreditation processes, making a plea for educators to trust beginning students' intuitions and knowledge. In 'Everything is Architecture and the Architecture of Everything: An independent study plan', Sgarbi makes a passionate polemic against the constraints and intentions of normative architectural education, arguing for an education that focuses on the cultivation of what he calls *diverging intelligence*, where students look for and explore sources beyond the canon, appreciate architecture beyond building and enjoy studies beyond final judgments and mandatory testing.⁸ Enquiry into the space of parallel separation between an architectural skillset and a dislodged consideration as cultivation of creative difference is a popular approach, offered in many schools.

U n l e a s h i n g c r e a t i v i t y a n d e x p e r i m e n t a t i o n

Five papers explore how inner creativity can be unleashed and brought forth. In their essay titled 'Strange Encounters: Creativity as a state of alterity in the early stages of design learning', Dimitra Ntzani and Amalia Banteli from the Welsh School of Architecture at Cardiff University explore the pedagogical role of alterity with beginning designers through experimental engagements with the Hijinx Inclusive Theatre Company during the design process. They offer alterity as a form of distancing from preconceptions to search for intangible creativity. A perennial question, even in the doctrinal days of mimesis of historical exemplars, unlocking creativity continues to be a driver.⁹ Inculcating

curiosity as a condition for creativity, Olivia Hamilton, Ying-Lan Dann, and Kate Geck describe three techniques in 'Interior Imaginings: Centring curiosity and imagination as key design tools in the first year' that they used to prompt their interior design students in the School of Architecture and Urban Design at RMIT University. To invite their curiosity and, subsequently, their creative investment during pandemic-related lockdowns, students were directed to incorporate narrative themes inspired by Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Margaret Mahony's design for The Capitol Theatre (Melbourne) throughout a multimedia design process.¹⁰ Similar provocations instigated via texts and other manifestations of ideas inspire 'Getting Lost in Design Drawing with the Satnav Natives' by Marc Andernach and James Burch of the University of the West of England. Suggesting digital metaphors for the students' navigation through design problems, they explore potential shifts in the attitude of digitally immersed learners in beginning architecture through exploratory sketching. This is argued as a response to the Attention Economy in which the students are challenged and overwhelmed with information. The authors look at the role of hand-drawing not as a tool of communication of the final product but rather as a tool for critical and creative thinking.¹¹

In 'The Architectural Moment: Construction and disruption of the creative process', Emma Curtin, Paul Bower, Anna Gidman and Ranald Lawrence discuss the advantages of setting off a design process from the scale of a detail rather than that of a master plan. They challenge students at the University of Liverpool, to begin with the detailed development of a threshold through handmade models. By doing so, they bring to the fore the multiple aspects of materials (from their raw construction to labour and energy), guiding students to cultivate a strong relationship with material assembly and construction from the very beginning.¹² At the University of the West of England, Yahya Lavaf invites students to explore two design exercises developed by Russian/Soviet artist Aleksander Rodchenko and architect Nikolai Ladovsky at VKhUTEMAS in the early twentieth century. In 'VKhUTEMAS Pedagogy: Composition and the new language of forms', Lavaf describes the outcomes of these one-day workshops on broadening and developing visual perception and abstract thinking for beginning architecture students.¹³

Community and collaboration

In 'Better Together: Tactics for integrating interdisciplinary collaboration into architectural design studios', Alice Lewis, Helen Duong, and Millie Catlin describe an approach to interdisciplinary design education. They outline six tactics to foster collaboration between architecture and the allied disciplines of landscape architecture and interior design, which are part of the RMIT's School of Architecture and Urban Design, where they teach. These tactics neither compartmentalise traditional disciplinary knowledge nor assign specific parts of a project to students from specific disciplines. Rather they challenge pre-established disciplinary criteria promoting original thought and innovation, with students working across multiple scales, questions, and topics simultaneously.¹⁴

In 'Building with Stories: *The Space of Words* design studio', Angeliki Sioli shifts beginning graduate-level architecture students at TU Delft away from their design preconceptions towards an exploration of translations. Questioning how their native languages affect architectural experience serves as a vehicle for fostering collaboration.¹⁵ Sandy Britton and Fei Chen of the University of Liverpool and Luke Cooper from Architectural Emporium present the importance of incorporating high street regeneration in beginning architecture through engagement with stakeholders within a responsive teaching model in 'Ideas for Huyton: Education through collaboration'.¹⁶ In 'Designing for People with Disabilities: Exploring inclusive design in architectural education', Menatella Kasem of Cardiff University/Zagazig University and Sam Clark and Dikaios Sakellariou, both of Cardiff University, present a scathing critique of architects' lack of concern for universal access and promotes the social model of disability in the beginning architecture studio as a step toward a holistic, inclusive design curriculum.¹⁷

These global responses offer many considerations to inform our understanding of how beginning architecture is being considered. Several authors offer radical assessments of current approaches, affirming continuing confrontations between the establishment and efforts to repeatedly renew, keeping the epistemology of the craft for a discipline that is dynamic, contextual, and responsive to the conditions that situate meaningful thought and action. The search for currency in pedagogical approaches is a constant.

Such challenges to extant conditions are necessary and take many forms and variants, all seeming to have the goal of unlocking and unleashing an unrealised creativity. This approach somewhat presumes that there is something already possessed to unlock, as opposed to something to acquire. Yet, evident in the approaches in these papers, crossing thresholds into the unknown bears identification with both, simultaneously seeking to unlock and to discover. Two studies exploring collaborative arrangements and participatory approaches seek to redefine new terms of engagement and challenge the professionalised possession of architecture as an ontological conceit. At the same time, it is disconcerting that some authors identify community engagement with the lay public, or designing for disabilities, as unique. This perhaps shows the disjuncture or delay that exists when a confrontation with the establishment is still ongoing and the process of modernisation still transitory. Paradigm shifts in recent times have overturned many standard practices; non-extractive construction, demountable building techniques allow for future recycling and upcycling, decolonisation in the canon of knowledge and awareness, inclusivity and widening participation, diversity of goals, the dismantling of older agendas of the solo genius architect, atypical career trajectories, and recent fallouts in the United Kingdom and United States over bullying and abusive practices have put paid to a range of now forlorn values that were not only stereotypical but once championed as exemplary.

It has been a rewarding exercise to scrutinise questions of beginning thresholds in architectural education. Perhaps the biggest lesson is to prepare to be nimble and to understand that the task in architectural education upon educators, students and the agencies that regulate education, globally, is to constantly seek currency and to know this pursuit is responsive, dynamic, continual, and developmental in its nature. The authors collectively share enlightening insights explored across the world, and all of it is merely a check on the pulse of where we are. Change has never been so potent in the ether of architectural education, and we are, again, at a new beginning.

A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

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