

Teaching Practice: the London School of Architecture.

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ABSTRACT This paper looks at new pedagogical relationships between practice and academia reflected in the Masters Course of our London based school of architecture. We reject the traditional binary opposition of academia versus practice to embrace intersectional learning and research. Embedded within the teaching model of the school is the conviction that there is a dynamic and critical conversation to be had between students, teachers and practitioners.

KEYWORDS education, practice, collaborative, ethical, political

Strategic definition

“When it comes to architectural education in the UK, one thing everyone agrees on is that it’s not fit for purpose any more. Students go through seven years of training, five of which are spent in school, only to end up earning a paltry salary in relation to comparably trained professionals.”¹

This paper has been designed to share and critically engage with the teaching and learning pedagogy of the new LSA (London School of Architecture). The question is whether an alternative educational model can successfully devise a validated curriculum that is able to embed the profession deeply within the programme while maintaining a critical distance from the nature of commercial practice. Too often the gulf between what is taught in schools of architecture and how practice operates is alluded to from both sides with little intention of addressing the gap.

Our manifesto identifies five behavioural prime values: propositional, relevant, innovative metropolitan and entrepreneurial. Embedded within the teaching model of the school is the conviction that there is a dynamic and critical conversation to be had between students, teachers and practitioners. We therefore challenge the traditional binary opposites of academia versus practice. However the LSA is not alone in redefining the parameters of architectural education. While programmes at Bath and Cardiff have long pioneered sandwich courses, there is a progressive integrated work place learning course at Sheffield. In Lyon architect Odile Decq set up her Confluence school, which is described as a site of emerging new relations

between systems of thought and modes of construction, reflecting:

“The Confluence challenges students to become pioneers in confronting problems encountered in the world and to use new tools to address them.”²

We also suggest it is necessary to see ways in which the production of architecture is an essentially political act and to challenge what Naomi Klein refers to as the triple crises of neoliberalism, economic inequality and climate change.³

Brief

In order to frame the discussion a short history of the development of the school is useful. Founder Will Hunter, then the deputy editor of the *Architectural Review*, published an article in 2012 proposing ARFA—*Alternative Routes For Architecture*—in order to challenge conventional models for architectural education and asking professionals and academics to offer their thoughts. As Hunter questioned:

“Are architecture schools housed within the state-controlled university system really the best place to create the next generation of architects?”⁴

This generated a debate swiftly leading to the proactive notion that the most effective response was to create what Jos Boys refers to as a grassroots new school.⁵ In addition the brief called for a reduction in student fees and therefore a different model of funding. The outcome was to partner with practice in a two-way conversation whereby a

student would be employed by practice three days a week and the practice would become involved in the programme of the school. The equation showed that students could earn £12,000 on base rate salary, working part time for one year which would offset the fees for the entire two year course.

Clearly the 'learn as you earn' paradigm crosses over with the standard student year out, but demands a new kind of relationship between the practice, the student and the school. This is fundamental to the forward looking re-casting of the entrenched hierarchy as a one way street, instead initiating a pivotal dialogue rooted in projects, research and writing.

Design

As the agenda of the school took shape we forged a working relationship with London Metropolitan University who became our Partner Institution. During the initial QAA stage we held a number of peer led reviews, testing the idea of the course and resulting in a series of critical commentaries and advice. Once validation from the University was received, we sought to gain accreditation from ARB and RIBA. Interestingly a number of commentators questioned why a new school wished to follow such an established pattern. However this is to forget that validation is for the students and their future career rather than as a badge for the school.

At the heart of the course lies a fundamental belief that learning through critical practice creates a research-led agenda that begins to challenge the education of the architect, creating a space for the network of practices to reflect and develop. This is a very different premise to the model where part-time tutors (mostly in work) come into the school to teach, as a way of furthering an agenda often not pursued in their every day career. They buy into the often esoteric values of the school as a means of escape, and to further an alternative conversation borne out of frustration with the 'real world'. Here we invite practicing architects both to share their knowledge and experience as well as to be propositional.

The LSA put out an open call to practices inviting them to become part of their network, explaining that there were three key ways of being involved. The first becoming an employer of a student, the second as a participator in the group 'think tank' projects and thirdly as a design tutor in second year.

"The LSA is creating a series of new relationships – between students and tutors, between academia and practice, between the discipline of architecture and others, and between the institution and the city – with the purpose of defining a new critical practice for architecture."⁶

Construction

The course aims to foster new ways of working through collaboration and group work, analogous to what Carlo Ratti terms a choral profession⁷. At its most basic this is because most architects work in teams and with other people; they are not a lone genius. It should be noted that while London Met were supportive of this initiative, it became clear that the marking of group work in higher education is not generally supported which perhaps goes some way in explain why architecture programmes favour the individual, both literally and societally.

Although the actual work students undertake in their three days employment is no business of the school, by creating a space between practicing and speculating within the programme there is the opportunity for the student to research and test their ideas, ideals and preconceptions in real time. They are placed in a 'live' situation where they are both practicing architect and scholar and potentially in a position where they can influence and calibrate both scenarios. To reinforce ties with the school 'Think Tank' design projects are run by practice leaders who develop a thematic brief which is taken on by groups of five or six students over a period of fourteen weeks.

The first year begins with an Urban Studies programme and ends researching the brief for the second year Thesis Project, which is characterised as their 'Proto-Practice' year. Two courses under the banner of 'Critical Practice' titled *Placement* and *Theory*, are where the student is asked to research, consider and propose ideas that relate to how architecture is practiced. The aim is to create a critical collision between speculation about architecture and speculating within architecture.

Underpinning our critical theory is the research of Leon Van Schaik who writes in *Mastering Architecture*, that research and peer review are vital to the growth and innovation of a practitioner, concluding:

"Designers who become creative innovators have all found a way to second-order learning: a process of observing themselves as learners and taking charge of the curation of themselves as learners"⁸.

In order to tease out and engage with the practice network, the students are required to write a critical practice Manual reflecting their observations and participation. The LSA asks that each student be assigned a mentor within the practice who allows up to half an hour a week for the student to ask questions and access issues and protocol they may not be party to. We invite the students to consider the culture of the office in parallel with the managerial structures, design philosophy and attitude towards technology. This is supported by a

series of group seminars that focus the students on finding a lens to view the practice, as well as sharing their experiences with the class. By way of an example one student working for a small all-women practice wrote her piece on 'Practicing Equality' while another placed at a large multi-national practice explored 'Borderless Sustainable Globalism'. We also asked that students include a technical case study as a mechanism to explore the way material detailing and sustainable thinking operate in the commercial context.

Throughout the first year theory teaching is framed through questioning the nature of architectural practice and production taking on board Peter Buchanan's observation that theory tends to 'weave a web of obfuscatory verbiage spinning away from a subject while criticism is concerned with a penetrating engagement and discernment'⁹. Using the vehicle of a personal manifesto the students are asked to consider their own agenda, their ethical position and to propose a way of thinking that equips them for their second year and beyond. As one student responded at the end of this year:

'The manifesto was crucial to me. This was the first time I could spend some time to sort many of my thoughts about architecture and try to position myself as an architect and really ask myself why I am doing what I do.'

To illustrate the diversity of thinking, this year one student wrote 'Atlas Paddling'; a part fictional account of a flooded future world triangulated with descriptions of cities that today flood on a regular basis. Taking a more journalistic approach 'Fake News' explored the way in which architectural imagery projects a series of perfected scenarios devoid of real life contingencies. Both pieces push the boundary of architectural writing, in order to construct new perspectives on current practices and scenarios.

In the second semester the Design Think Tank project is perhaps the most radical aspect of the programme where half a dozen students and practices collaboratively produce design research. Here the groups are charged with looking at the spatial consequences of rapid expansion, climate change and data modelling in order to make informed propositions. Everyone is looking at current urban challenges and in particular those of London. Our students are agents for change, and believe that in order to be in a position to actively engage in the city, they need to use their time in education to understand and research the current condition. As George Monbiot reflects in 'How did we get into this mess?' it is ideas that determine whether human creativity works for society or against it.¹⁰

This year one group, under the umbrella title Global Currents, looks at the impact of poor air quality in London. Eighteen months ago this subject was hardly discussed, certainly not by architects. Through grass roots lobbying and recognition by the Mayor this is now seen as a pressing issue intertwined with transport, infrastructure and emissions. All students present their final group work to a public audience and it was encouraging that one group, SWARM, were subsequently invited to share their work at a keynote presentation at the annual BNA, the Royal Institute of Dutch Architects. Importantly too is the implication for the practices, and this year we saw a number of the professional teams continuing their dialogues, and in one case working up a competition proposal together.

Moving into second year, the students consider the history of architecture as a history of design methodologies. Here the hegemony of modernism is destabilised, allowing the discussion to reach back in time to the classical tradition, the Beaux-Arts as well as the canon of C20th 'greats'. The student output is in the form of drawings, based on an architect or practice, as opposed to a written document. The work seeks to uncover the tools for excavating all the layers of significance in an architectural approach. It is forensic in its focus, and by asking students to draw, is another way in which the threads of architectural knowledge can be synthesised.

The rest of the year is spent developing two design projects, where the first shorter exercise is set up to allow students to test their own design methodology which is then critically reflected upon and refined for their thesis project. This is evolved alongside technical teaching inviting experimentation speculation and testing of strategies for the use of materials, structures, form, inhabitation and sustainability. While a number of the students expressed regret that they were no longer working in groups, the school has taken the position that it is the contrast between different working modes that gives them the tools for their future practice.

In use

Having run for only two years the project of the LSA has gained traction and momentum. The school received its ARB accreditation in 2017 and in June was validated by the RIBA who commended the school for offering a sense of empowerment and independence to students. In parallel the feedback from practices involved, such as PDP, is as important:

"It is the school's commitment to research and collaborative working methods that makes their educational model unique to other architecture schools and really sets them apart. Alongside their practice work and associated assignments, the

students are also grouped together with practices from the LSA Practice Network to form ‘Design Think Tanks’ in order to explore a shared research question.”¹¹

Returning to the pioneering work undertaken by Leon Van Schaik, we believe the programme reflects his conviction that as “We move away from the notion of the architect as the abstract entity ‘architect’ and move much more into architects as research question-driven practitioners.”¹²

Conclusion

The LSA confronts what some see as our corrosive value system that places profit above the well-being of people and the planet. Our vision, through architectural education, is to enable people living in cities to lead more fulfilled and sustainable lives.

We recognise that the school is finding it’s feet and the first cohort have been inspiring in their belief

and engagement in shaping the school. Their feedback has been invaluable, resulting in changes to both the timetable and the content. Perhaps the most critical comments have centred around the dichotomy of teaching a more equitable vision for practice while expecting students to be super-human at times, balancing working to earn money with the intense pressure of producing a portfolio. However the final word goes to one of our recent graduates reflecting:

“The programme is interesting and progressive and I am glad I came here over anywhere else. When I compare my cohort to that of friends at other institutions I believe that we have the broader and more significant skill base and relevance to the profession and the changing world”.

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⁴ Will Hunter, *Alternative Routes to Architecture* (Architectural Review 28.09.12).

⁵ Jos Boys, *Building Better Universities: Strategies, Spaces, Technologies* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 28.
“There are other-grassroots-up- initiatives, responding to the difficulties caused for potential learners by increasing tuition fees and perceived inadequacies in the existing university provision.”

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