

STUDIO CULTURE: WHO NEEDS IT?

A Conference for Teachers in Schools of Architecture and Landscape

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Trigger Paper

Theme: Equal Opportunities / Student Concerns

Q: Does studio culture favour students of particular gender [male], race [white], or personal background [middle class]?

This is a difficult question to answer, and one that seems to remain surprisingly absent in most recent debates concerning the condition of architectural education (it is quite telling that 'Equality and Diversity' and 'The Student Perspective', originally programmed to be separate parallel discussion sessions at the conference, were eventually paired in a single session due to lack of interest from tutors attending the conference). One would hope it's not often the case that a studio culture within a school of architecture actively or overtly favours certain students. It is feasible however that there are certain entrenched philosophies, teaching methods, and dominant subject areas taught within schools which, when, extended into studio cultures, indirectly favour certain students. The fact that certain groups - for example female and black and minority ethnic (BME) - are underrepresented in studios within schools of architecture, coupled with the fact that drop-out rates for these groups are high, would certainly suggest that the answer to the question, in some cases, could certainly be 'yes'.

Designing Diversity: The student / tutor, student / critic relationship

The activity at the heart of any studio culture is design, therefore it may be beneficial to approach this issue by asking a slightly different, and slightly longer, question: '*Does studio culture facilitate the aspirations of certain students whose design and theoretical interests are considered 'marginal' or outside of the dominant core subjects of the curriculum and mainstream architecture culture?*'

For example, if a student's thesis project was to design a 'contemporary Hindu temple in East London', would a tutor whose research interest was kindergarten architecture have the knowledge or sensibility to deal with the specific and particular complexities a thesis such as this throws up? Would it be useful for schools to have access to visiting critics who have expertise in certain non-mainstream architectural subjects? Expert visiting critics could be useful in that they would have the ability to serve students effectively and at the same time protect the ideal of meritocracy. For example, a particular student's ability to deal with certain subjects can be assessed with the reduced risk of the student claiming unfair treatment or lack of guidance due to lack of understanding or knowledge on the

tutor or critic's part (and thereby devaluing genuine grievances). How could studio cultures collaborate effectively with other disciplines who are more advanced in dealing with issues related to 'alternative' or 'marginal' subjects (for example 'Race' or Gender) in order to help students with certain interests fulfil their design ambitions; could this be done through, for example, inter-departmental shared option courses or wide ranging specialised 'pathways'? At what stage of architectural education can studio culture feasibly offer opportunity and support to certain groups or ambitions, what are the constraints, and opportunities for a more flexible and, crucially, a more *responsive* studio culture?

Are studio cultures obliged to respond?

The questions above are sparked by feedback I have received from students as a Society of Black Architects mentor during recent years, as a visiting critic over the past four years, as a practising architect working with Pt1 and Pt2 students, as well as recent involvement in research on the subject. The various accounts students have given me of their experiences (primarily BME students but not always) have all had in common the feeling of being disenfranchised. It should be noted however that not all minority students feel this way and many flourish within existing studio cultures and find inspiration in mainstream taught subjects. It is also interesting to note that the title of this conference is *Studio Culture: Who Needs It?* This causes one to begin thinking of the 'culture' in question as a single homogenous and defined entity. In fact it may be more stimulating and productive if it were *Studio Cultures: What Types & Where?* There is a rich mix of studio cultures in architectural education and students entering them should be aware of what they are and which would suit their particular aspirations and needs. Some studio cultures are better than others at addressing issues to do with equal opportunities and supporting diversity. However, certain minority students may not gain admission into those cultures and end up in less responsive ones. In these situations the central question should be: *'are those studio cultures ethically obliged to respond to the needs of minority (in the widest sense of the word) students?'*

Time and money

Outside of design directly, there are other situations where equality can be tested against broader but equally crucial issues. Certain students, take for example, a mature student with a family, a young or single parent, may not be able to engage the 'all-nighter' culture because of domestic responsibilities. A student suffering from financial hardship may not be able to engage through having to work evenings to support their education. Further more, these students may not be able to afford to spend the excessive amounts of money required (or perceived to be required) in certain schools or studio cultures for project materials (because of financial hardship or the need to support a child or family). This would put these students at a disadvantage when placed against those who have no financial hardship or responsibilities mentioned.

As well as throwing up interesting questions relating to assessment methods and benchmarking statements in relation to these disadvantages (or differences), this throws up equally interesting questions relating to the preparation of students for practice and frames the question of equality in an overtly constructive way; can equality be used indirectly as a device to encourage students to design within time constraints and budgets? This could reduce inequality and allow students' work to be assessed on true creative ability and intellectual capacity (a 'like for like' approach). Along with this, by breaking the myth that 'all-nighters' and even late nights are a necessary rite of passage, it would be possible to engender a studio culture that, when transferred to practice, would help formulate a culture in which architects work less late nights for free and have increased awareness of the intersection between creative endeavour and business sense (resulting in increased equality, sound practice management skills, and higher fee incomes for all!).

Equality: A means to a diverse and excellent end

Finally, I would assert that that equality should not be pursued in studio cultures from an ethical perspective alone. As I have briefly outlined above, the positive impact of achieving an appreciable degree of equality can be far-reaching. Creating studio cultures that are responsive and attentive to equality issues will no doubt play a part in attracting more members of under-represented groups to them. This will in turn, create more (culturally) diverse studio cultures and, by extension, studio cultures that are reflective of contemporary cosmopolitan society. Studio cultures of this kind offer the possibility of a cross-fertilisation of knowledge between students of contrasting cultures (as well as locating areas of commonality), constantly challenging singular viewpoints and testing the limits of the discipline. If diversity and reflexivity were the defining characteristics of any studio culture, the lack of a dominant group, discourse, design theory or agenda, would mean that meritocracy by default would be a given, and excellence in design (in whatever 'shape' or 'form') could be a true and realistic objective.

End.

Samir Pandya

Part Time Visiting Lecturer (University of Westminster).

Chair – Architects For Change: Equality Forum at the RIBA.

Practicing Architect, London (Shepherd Epstein Hunter).