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The education of architects



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ON DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

THE HOLIDAY BREAK BETWEEN

one year and the next can allow for contemplation on the way we do things. This year, my recent musings (as the new decade arrived) kept returning to the education of architects and of architecture – and how complex and difficult this is.

Architecture is an undefinable and broad body of knowledge acquired over time and through practice, and it is both universal and context specific. The teaching of this knowledge can and has taken many forms over many eras, alongside a continual, ongoing debate regarding teaching methods, teaching content and approaches.

Many ascribe to the ‘compartmentalised blocks of knowledge’ school of thought, confident in a predetermined sequence of lessons that will produce the competent and consistent graduates desired by the profession. Others tend to a ‘liberal arts’ model, where having multiple viewpoints on any one area of knowledge is encouraged and a singular hierarchy of architectural knowledge is challenged.

As stated by Joanne Pouzenc

Portrait illustration by Julia Gessler.

when writing on academia, “... a fundamental difference divides the architectural educational scene: whereas some schools focus on teaching architecture, others propose to train architects.”¹

In addition to such basic philosophical differences between intellectual freedom and vocational training, there are other issues at play, such as the ongoing push and pull over where responsibilities lie for practice-based education; are they with the universities or with the profession? And yet more complexities arise from the effects, on any agreed curriculum, of digital technologies and globalised communities.

There is also enormous pressure on graduates – we demand that they know the basics of the full breadth of architectural knowledge but we, also, rely on them to be the change-makers for the profession. In other words, we want them to be ‘practice-ready’ as well as being the radical thinkers who move architecture forward: a very large request indeed.

Education providers grapple with such issues constantly and it has been interesting to watch recent new alternative schools of architecture open in the Western world, indicating that we are again in an era of social and cultural shift. (However, this is probably not quite as significant as were the Paris student protests of 1968, which indicated a rejection of the Beaux-Arts School teaching methods and had a huge effect across Western universities – including Auckland, which had its own student course-reform protest in 1972.)

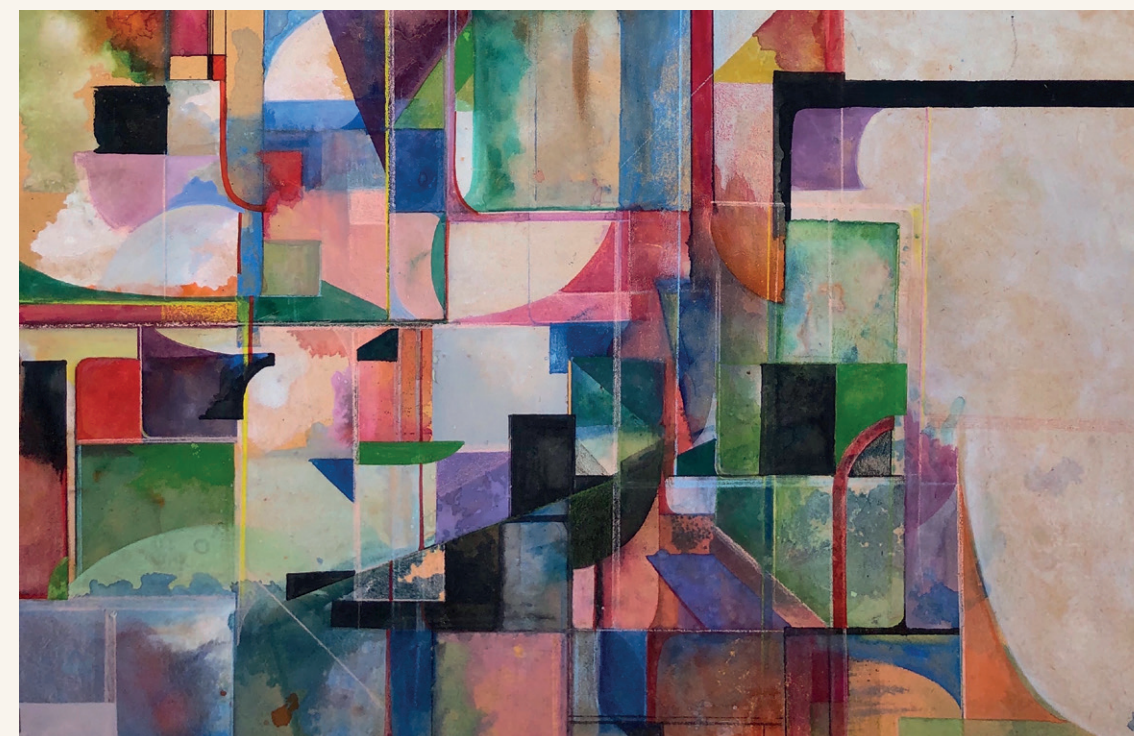
In the last decade, new schools have included the Confluence Institute in Lyon, France, established by Odile Decq in 2014,² the London School of Architecture (LSA, 2015)³ and the Free School of Architecture in Los Angeles

(2017)⁴, established by Peter Zellner. Auckland graduate Tessa Forde is now co-owner and programme coordinator for the Free School, and Auckland graduate Simon Glaister has attended and tutored. There are also many free online architectural degree courses, such as the one offered by Harvard University.

The reasons for such alternative schools appearing vary but the aim is to challenge the established patterns of education that produce ‘remarkably conformist’ graduates.⁵ Common concerns are the environment, cross-disciplinary knowledge, a revision of the established Eurocentric architecture education approach, and equity.

In New Zealand, we have benefitted from having three universities⁶ providing degrees in architecture, allowing for differences in priorities and specialisations in course delivery to develop. Some would claim there is not enough distinction between them, although perhaps the newcomer and fourth university provider, AUT, will stimulate further positioning. AUT has already clarified its point of difference, with its stated curriculum focus on indigenous and environmental knowledge.

In December 2000, Unitec definitely placed a stake in the ground marking its approach to teaching architecture, when Professor Branko Mitrovic and Head of School Tony van Raat published an article in *Architecture New Zealand*.⁷ ‘Architectural education: A manifesto’ provoked an immediate response from Professor John Hunt of the University of Auckland in a letter to the editor, followed by an article⁸ and further letters. Many academics, practitioners and students joined the debate and, in total, there were two response articles (by John Hunt and Peter Wood)⁹, a commentary (by Charles Walker) and



ABOVE

Sarah Bookman ‘Composition study of pipework’ – from *The Shift from the Personal to the Public: The (small) room in the (large) city*, (2017) MArch (Prof) thesis, University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning.

Watercolour (original 292x415mm)

Bookman’s thesis project examines architecture at macro and micro scales simultaneously, via urban infrastructure systems (public toilets). Usually, systemised architectural solutions are treated in a rational manner; however, here, the design process provided richness at every level, via her multilayered approach to the topic. Bookman overlaps various design and research approaches – using experimental modelling, systems master-planning, 1:1 detailing, history and theory, drawing, painting, needlework, journal-keeping and furniture-making.

nine letters to the editor (including from Errol Haarhoff from the University of Auckland, and return volleys from Branko Mitrovic and John Hunt, among others).

The flurry of discussion provided a welcomed insight into conflicting approaches to the teaching of such a multidisciplinary subject area. While I personally opposed the views put forward by the ‘manifesto’ article (especially in relation to cultural value and architecture), I valued the bravery and clarity of initiating a discussion on this emotive and often-muddy topic.

I highly recommend hunting down back copies of these *Architecture New Zealand* issues (December 2000–September 2001) to follow the debate, as they offer a snapshot of an important and seemingly never-ending discussion. While some comments may now be dated, so much of what was said on both sides still applies in contemporary argument.

I believe it is essential that this discussion is raised often, and continued at regular intervals, so that both the profession and the educating institutions challenge,

clarify and check that what is being taught (and how it is being taught) stays fresh to the students, and, also, so that the profession is reminded that universities are more than technical schools producing workers for industry.¹⁰

My holiday musings on the complexities of teaching architecture were shared with several non-architects and I was made aware of surprising interdisciplinary influences. Educators from other fields revealed that ‘how architecture is taught’ is being picked up by other disciplines, and professors from anthropology and art history provided examples of how, in an attempt to avoid the essay/exam structures of thinking, they ask students to translate information spatially.¹¹ Installation, film, drawing and modelling are being interwoven into courses outside of architecture, just as architecture courses (such as Odile Decq’s) include non-architectural disciplines, such as neuroscience and sociology. As disciplinary boundaries transform, education responds. I think that architectural education is in a very healthy state indeed; let’s keep talking. **🗨**

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 - 2 dezeen.com/2016/03/15/odile-decq-french-architect-profile-biography-key-buildings-confluence-architecture-school-jane-drew-prize/
 - 3 the-lsa.org/about/development/#1
 - 4 freeschoolofarchitecture.org/ (A debate is to be had here around using unpaid tutors to deliver such courses but, perhaps, for another time.)
 - 5 Peter Zellner, *archinect.com/features/article/150036928/checking-back-in-wit*
 - 6 Victoria University of Wellington, the University of Auckland and Unitec.
 - 7 Branko Mitrovic and Anthony van Raat, ‘Architectural education: A manifesto’, *Architecture New Zealand*, December 2000, pp. 88–94
 - 8 John Hunt, ‘Facts, fictions and fantasies’, *Architecture New Zealand*, March/April 2001, pp. 76–78
 - 9 Peter Wood, ‘Architectural education’, *Architecture New Zealand*, March/April 2001, pp. 72–74
 - 10 The AACA Research Report *Architectural Education and the Profession in Australia and New Zealand* (December 2019) provides clear information from both practitioners and universities on this very conversation. aaca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Architectural-Education-and-The-Profession-in-Australia-and-New-Zealand.pdf
 - 11 For example, coursework set by Professor Paige West, Anthropology, Columbia University.
- Note: I am a part-time educator at the University of Auckland as well as a practitioner. The views expressed in this column are my own and do not represent the views of the School of Architecture and Planning.*