

**Non-traditional architectural studies: What might influence the development of a successful model? A Review of literature**

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**Abstract**

*The traditional architectural studio, almost universal in its pedagogical approach, is not very accommodating of non-traditional students. This paper investigates views on current architectural education methodology, the experience and learning way of the full-time student (standing in the current methodology) and the needs of the typical non-traditional architectural student through an exploratory survey of existing literature.*

*The context is South Africa, where a very real need for such studies exists. The SACAP (the South African Council for the Architectural Profession) allows the registration of professionals in different categories, depending on academic qualification and workplace experience. Currently the category of 'architect' is still predominantly white-male orientated and transformation is urgently needed. However, "professionals in 'lower' categories (for example architectural technologist), who want to study further to better their qualification and registration category, have at the moment only full-time, traditional studies to choose from." (Author, 2010:2)*

*Traditional architectural education has at the core an intense studio culture. The time dedication required to sustain this culture is difficult, if not impossible for a student that does not study full-time. A non-traditional student will therefore be at a disadvantage compared to a full-time student in experiencing the many positive characteristics of studio culture. The time demanding and intense workload in the traditional studio allows very few professionals, standing in the workplace already, the opportunity to study further.*

*The intention with the literature survey is to understand the characteristics of current architectural full-time education and the student experience thereof and to discover whether this can serve the need of the non-traditional architectural students.*

**Keywords**

*Architectural Education, Non-Traditional Student, Studio Pedagogy, Studio Culture, Part-Time*

**Introduction**

Why is it necessary to explore an alternative way of delivering architectural part-time studies to the non-traditional student? Is it not possible to just "spread" the full-time course over more years so that students have more time to complete their studies? It is important to define here that with the term 'part-time studies', reference is made specifically to architectural studies that are not offered on a full-time basis and with the term 'non-traditional student', reference is made specifically to students that are already situated in full-time architectural practice, registered in one of the 'lower' categories with SACAP, whilst at the same time pursuing further studies.

It is imperative to mention the need for current transformation in the South African architectural profession, which will partially explain the urgency and relevancy of the exploration into a workable non-traditional way of delivering architectural education. The profession is still dominated by white males, especially in the category of professional architect. In a presentation ‘Transformation and Skills Development Strategy’ of 3 March 2011, the South African Institute for Architecture called for “*workplaces that reflect the demographics of the country across all job levels and categories (in terms of) race and gender*”. (SAIA: Transformation and Skills Development Strategy, 2011:5)

The option of post-diploma and post-degree part-time architectural studies has been offered at various South African institutions, but has never proved very successful. This is evident in that the courses were often started but then discontinued after a few years. This could possibly be due to the full-time pedagogy and methodology at most being adapted to the offering of formal classes after working hours and making it possible to complete subjects in different years. This is an exhaustive, if not impossible, schedule for students, who are also working full-time and often have family commitments, to sustain. How then might a successful part-time architectural course be structured?

What becomes clear, as Nedcut Teymur observes, is that it will be necessary “*to develop a critical awareness of the ways in which we think, talk, design, run and evaluate architectural education*”. It will not be possible to simply rely on a traditional teaching practice that has been “*variously informed by pedagogic traditions (e.g. Beaux Arts, Bauhaus, etc.)*” and which is often perceived as the only way of knowledge gain in architecture. As a consequence this attitude has created “*architectural schools and teachers across the world (that) are more similar than different.*” He further says that “[w]hile students are expected to be creative (and critical) in their work, the need for the same qualities to be present in the very design of projects and syllabi is taken for granted.” (Teymur 2002:1).

In answering Teymur’s request for critical awareness, it would then be necessary to ‘think’ about how to ‘design’ and ‘run’ the architectural education of the non-traditional student. The thinking part forms the basis of the structure of this paper and is initiated by exploring literature views on current architectural education methodology, the experience and learning way of the full-time student (standing in the current methodology) and the needs of the typical non-traditional architectural student.

### **Views on current architectural education methodology**

Architectural education has, for a very long time, been more of a culture than pedagogy. As Stevens writes, it is a “*cultivated habitus*” and that we need to distinguish between “*a scholastic and a charismatic mode of inculcation. The scholastic mode is what we normally recognize as pedagogy, the formal and explicit teaching of formal and explicit knowledge and skills. The charismatic mode is the informal and implicit method of inculcation, which is the only possible means of transferring embodied cultural capital. The former is intended to product knowing, the latter being.*” (Stevens, 1995:117)

It is no wonder then that alternative ways of teaching are often ridiculed and frowned upon by academics and practioners alike. Having been so indoctrinated to adhere to the architectural culture, they probably have no choice. Stevens describes this well in writing that architectural education “*produces a socially and mentally homogeneous set of individuals whose homogeneity reinforces the socialization process and the closure of social capital, limiting the chances of misalliances and laying the foundations for future patterns of cooperation in later career.*” (Stevens, 1995:118) Challenges to

the status quo of architectural education are met with suspicion and with the fear that the sacred studio will be exposed or questioned as not being the ultimate teaching model.

In a recent report on “*Issues that confront Architectural Education in Australia*” the authors highlight the value that the studio contributes to the design education of architects. They mention “*the value of the architectural studio as a learning community*” and mention that the “*studio experience contributes to the development of the life-long learner and establishes the milieu for creative actions later in practice*”. Whilst this seems to be the opinion that most architectural educators also have, the report goes further to challenge traditional perceptions of the studio and calls for research into challenges facing architectural education in Australia. These are defined as “*concerns, hurdles or impediments currently facing architectural education across Australia. Such concerns might include issues like ‘studio teaching’, ‘assessing creativity’, and the ‘research and creativity nexus’.*” (Williams et al, 2007:8)

In most schools the studio forms the place where a diverse set of theoretical knowledge must be applied. This is a difficult task. Studio takes the form of project-based instruction and to introduce history, architectural theory, technology, professional practice, environmental studies, computer and hand drawing becomes complex.

Challis, in a study entitled “*Integrating the conceptual and practice worlds: A case study in Architecture*” specifically identifies three challenges that architectural education has if there is a need to prepare students for their work in the profession. These are the provision of “*meaningful and purposeful links with other disciplines*”, the marrying of “*the worlds of design and construction*” and “*to move from the individual to the collaborative*”. (Challis, 2002:3). Challis also questions the learning experience students gain from projects that are not grounded in authenticity and mentions specifically the link between design and technology or as she calls it “*the tectonic approach to design*” (Challis, 2002:4). She mentions that “*incorporating the science of the art of construction...is best realised when a design concept is actually constructed and an interaction between user and artefact occurs*”. (Challis, 2002:4)

Salama and Crosbi also address authenticity in architectural studio. They explain “*that traditional teaching practices have long encouraged students to develop form manipulation skills by emphasizing intuition, reflective observation, and concept formation*”. The problem with this, and I fully agree, is “*these practices are hypothetical, largely unconcerned with real life situations, and neglect equally important skills that can be enhanced through experiential learning, research, or real interaction with the realities being studied.*” They suggest that “*learning from the actual environment should be introduced. Real life experiences can provide students with opportunities to understand the practical realities and different variables that affect real-life situations.* There has been a move towards introducing real life projects into the studio environment at CPUT in the recent past and, according to Salama and Crosbi, this has also happened internationally. The authors further say that “*while published experiences have debated innovative practices exemplified by exposing students to primary source materials in generic terms; little emphasis has been placed upon how structured experiences could be introduced in theory and lecture courses.*” (Salama & Crosbi, 2010:103)

Studio projects are increasingly expected to be more grounded in authentic learning. A further requirement that most schools of architecture have is that *[s]tudio courses are intended as the point of integration for all other coursework and educational experiences.* (Koch & Dutton, 2002:3) In other words studio is the place where application happens. In typical part-time scenario, students would concentrate on doing theory subjects in the evening one year and then dedicated a next year to studio projects. This divorces the possibility of proper integration because the subjects are divorced through time.

In a recent study that discusses the idea of “*total integration*” of theory and other subject matter in the design work of architectural education, Deshpande writes that *[a]rchitectural design, per se, is not to be seen as a subject of study by itself, but an opportunity to bring together into a comprehensive whole the subject matter and knowledge acquired from peripheral area of study. Design ought to be seen not as a “subject” of learning but an application of what is learned from support subjects.....[t]he studio is like a crucible where all applied knowledge and the essentials of design melt into each other to obtain a unified whole. This is what we call ... the “Total Integration.” The concept of an integrated studio for the realisation of “Total Architecture” is not necessarily new, but an innovative approach is needed to be adopted in its implementation.* (Deshpande, 2010:254). Salama goes as far as suggesting “*A theory for integrating knowledge in architectural design education*” which moves beyond mere integration of current supporting subjects into the studio. The study addresses how the architectural knowledge base can be assimilated. The aim of the theory is to “*foster the development of responsive knowledge critical to the successful creation of built environments*” (Salama, 2008:100)

#### **Views on the educational experience of the full-time architectural student**

(Full-time architectural student: Student enrolled for undergraduate or post-graduate full-time studies, not working, seldom has extensive family commitments, often only responsible for self)

Full-time architectural students spend most of their time in the studio. Students practically live there. It is the place “*where students learn to transcend complex and indeterminate challenges so as to artfully and intelligently produce figural schemes for a built environment of human significance*”. (Bachman & Bachman, 2009:316) The studio has not changed significantly over the past century and this is true of most architectural schools. Whilst this is not a critique on current studio methodology, it is important to understand that architectural education, and specifically the studio, has effectively not been critiqued or challenged until the past two decades. Some seminal works have been published of which Dr Ashraf Salama’s book “*Transformative pedagogy in architecture and urbanism.*” (2009) is a critical in-depth study and analyses of current studio practice. Two international journals are dedicated to work in this field, The Journal of Architectural Education and The International Journal of Architectural Research. There are no such publications in South Africa and few, if any, South African architectural educators publish in these magazines. The debate and discussion on architectural education is still not widespread, or even perceived as necessary, amongst most academics. (Teymur 2002:1)

The behaviour and experience of students in the architectural studio has been quite thoroughly investigated by Bachman & Bachman. In a 2006 study titled “*Student perceptions of academic workload in architectural education*” their “*findings consistently indicated that architecture students spend more than 40 hours a week on studio design projects in addition to their other coursework, and also that they average less than five and a half hours of sleep a night.* They further write that

*“anecdotal comments ... support what architecture students in our studies recognise: studio demands can be gruelling, loosely managed, sudden shifting, and subjectively evaluated on loosely applied professional opinion”.* (Bachman & Bachman, 2009:315) Architectural students and people in the architectural profession will concur with this, as most, if not all of them, irrespective of the school they were trained in, have experienced this type of education.

In another 2009 study by Bachman & Bachman (who is respectively an academic psychologist and an academic architect) entitled *“Self-identity, rationalisation and cognitive dissonance in undergraduate architectural design learning”* they investigate *“the persistence of architecture students in undergraduate design learning despite the considerable sacrifices that this frequently entails”* (2009:215) These sacrifices are described as *“workload compromises (which) often lead directly to excessive loss of sleep, poor diet, lack of even minimal exercise, and marginal family and social activity”.* (Bachman & Bachman, 2006:5) Architecture students are not scared of working hard despite the negative impact this work has on their health and social lives. The study concludes that this is part of a perpetuated culture in architectural education and that it is almost easier to become immersed in this culture and its peculiarities, since that is the only way to justify the sacrifice being made. (ibid)

Considering these gruelling circumstances under which students operate, it is no wonder that students have formally called for a change in studio culture. In a report by the The American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS), the following observations are made: *it is natural for studio courses and their environments to create their own culture. However, this culture too often becomes an all-consuming aspect in the lives of students.* The report is very positive about certain aspects of the studio, and particularly it mentions *“[f]ew other disciplines have courses with such direct one-on-one interaction between faculty and students, whereby students receive immediate feedback on their work. The studio model offers tremendous potential for creative discovery, exploration of ideas, critical discussions, and risk-taking. As one faculty member suggested in his response to ... our call for perspectives: “Promoting and supporting critical and synthetic thinking, exploring the relationship between the built environment and the larger cultural context, the ability to create amidst uncertainty, the joy of making, the rewards of building one’s own sensibility as a designer, opportunities for collaboration and working with ‘real life’ situations are just a few attributes of successful design studios.”*(Koch & Dutton, 2002:3)

The report is called *“The Redesign of Studio Culture”* and hence focuses more on what should change than what is positive in terms of studio culture. The report isolates specific aspects, which are labelled as *“studio myths”*, of which the opinion is that it should not be perpetuated any more. These *“myths”*, often perceived as the truth in many schools, are: *[a]rchitectural education should require personal and physical sacrifice; the creation of architecture should be a solo, artistic struggle; the best students are those who spend the most hours in studio; success in architecture school is only attained by investing all of your energy in studio; it is impossible to be a successful architect unless you excel in the design studio; students should not have a life outside of architecture school; the best design ideas only come in the middle of the night; creative energy only comes from the pressure of deadlines; students must devote themselves to studio in order to belong to the architecture community; collaboration with other students means giving up the best ideas; it is more important to finish a few extra drawings than sleep or mentally prepare for the design review; it is possible to learn about complex social and cultural*

*issues while spending the majority of time sitting at a studio desk; students do not have the power to make changes within architecture programs or the design studio. (Koch & Dutton, 2002:6)*

I believed these myths while studying architecture, so did my fellow students and almost every other architect and architectural student I currently know. Would a person already in practice, also a believer of these myths, be prepared to study further, even part-time, if they had any commitments other than studying? An individual would certainly need to be very motivated, have a wonderful support structure and a supporting family and be prepared to compromise on leading a healthy and balanced life, and that over an extended period of time. It certainly sounds daunting.

The report by AIAS tables a number of proposals for what an architectural student's experience in education should be like. It is worth shortly discussing these to understand what the students want. The proposals fall in two broad categories and deals firstly with of quality of life and secondly that of the pedagogy of design teaching. Most of these proposals are not unreasonable. Quality of life issues are that *"students should lead balanced lives, time is more than a constantly endangered resource"* and that *"there is a world outside of the design studio"*. Surely these are also life skills that as responsible educators we should be teaching our students? We do want our students to turn into productive members of society who lead healthy and balanced lives while contributing in a worthwhile manner to the built environment. We do not want our students as society members to have social circles just containing other architects, to be constantly tired and to not value the time of others. (Koch & Dutton, 2002:6))

The proposals that deal with the pedagogy of design teaching are: *"design is the integration of many parts, design process is as important as product, collaboration is the art of design, design is inherently an interdisciplinary act, even educators can learn, the good of students must prevail"* (ibid) are issues that are being addressed by serious researchers into architectural education. It is acknowledged that in a rapidly changing world architectural education pedagogy and androgogy, which deals with *"facilitating the acquisition of the content"* (Deshpande & Khan 2010:256) cannot stay unexamined and only repeat what has been done in the past century.

### **Views on the needs of typical non-traditional architectural students**

(Non-traditional architectural student: Student enrolled for post-graduate part-time studies, working in an architectural office, often has extensive family commitments, not only responsible for self)

The non-traditional student that is the focus of this paper typically has been through full-time studies and knows what kind of commitment is expected. Such students might be reluctant to take on studies again, knowing what is required. Traditional studio teaching methodology unfortunately does not support the needs of part-time students. Roux (1979:9) warns that *"methods can become inflexible recipes and thus lose touch with the underlying didactic principles"*. Roux further states that in *"applying methodology, the teacher looks for positive and meaningful ways to organize his teaching practice. To accomplish this, he has to think of ways and methods that will allow the learning content to make a lasting impression ... the methods used by the teacher will influence in particular ways the teaching and learning activities ... the teacher must ensure that the methods link up with the subject he is presenting in such a way that the pupil can acquire adequate knowledge and control of his subject area. Using a particular method should not be a matter of routine. Rigid recipes should not be used and*

the methods should continually be adapted and adjusted to the pre-established aim. The teacher has full responsibility for what takes place in the classroom, and in this light the methods have to be chosen and planned in responsible ways. (Author, 2010:8)

Architectural part-time students would have similar needs to those documented for part-time students in general. However, there might be special needs that should be considered. Pui Yee specifically researched the needs of part-time students in design related vocational practice. In doing so he investigated “actual needs of students in terms of values, attitudes, existing difficulties between study and career competencies and areas of improvement” (Pui Yee, 2006:1). This was a study in which he set out to determine data that could inform the design of a new subject for integrated learning at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. (Author, 2010:8)

Pui Yee (2006:3) further describes “values and attitudes” and draws attention to “perseverance, respect for others, responsibility, national/cultural identity and accountability,” that students in life-long learning need and which are also required in the workplace.

*“Part-time architectural students that have been in the workplace for a period of time will be used to vocational practice. Navigating successfully between the workplace and the academic environment could prove to be difficult. Creating an academic platform that has as its foundation a focus on practical implication might be easier for students to adapt to.”* (Author, 2010:8)

The adult student in education is becoming a greater part of university society. These students are often doing post-degree courses, wanting to further their studies while at the same time continuing to work full-time. In a study: “The politics of neglect: Adult learners in higher education”, the authors call for the need to recognise the specific requirements and circumstances of adult learners. “Because higher education has been anchored in its historical traditions of residential, selective education and because it is based in perceptions of a privileged place and role for young adult leadership development, this environment embraces full-time, residential youth. Little space, voice, and value are given to other groups and in particular those who are the most different from young students: adult learners.” They also argue that all resources are geared and adapted to the need of the younger student and that no provision is made for adult learners. (Sisal et al, 2001:18) The same would be true of course structures and course pedagogy, which form part of the resources of a university.

Sisal et al (2001:22) goes further to say that adult educators should be “[en]visioning different frameworks and assumptions to construct change and action” and should be showing a “willingness to challenge current conditions while proposing and implementing better resources for adult learners” as well as “developing new understandings of adult life, adult work, and the adult place in civic responsibility and aligning that valued role with adults’ role as learners in higher education.”

## **Conclusion**

Current architectural education methodology, followed by every architectural learning site in South Africa, is an intense study programme that as a full-time option leaves very little time for students to do anything outside of their studies. Even stretching the same content and methodology over more years still makes it very difficult for non-traditional students studying on a part-time to satisfactorily complete. Such a ‘stretched’ part-time option loses all the benefits that the pedagogy provides for full-time students. There is no interactive, supportive and social studio environment. The integration of

surrounding content into studio projects and vice versa is almost impossible, since subjects are taken in different years. Furthermore this 'stretched' option has never proved completely viable as indicated by the short duration that these options were offered for.

Literature views on current architectural education seem to ask for transformation of the way that architectural pedagogy is constructed while at the same time advocates of adult education is calling for new practices specifically geared towards the needs of adult students. It is clear, from this initial literature survey that a different mode of delivery needs to be investigated for non-traditional architectural studies. This model will have to include the positives, like the supportive community, but not the negatives, of the current studio. This model should take into account current literature on architectural education to address specific challenges identified, like the quest for authentic learning and a transferable knowledge base.

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