

CHANGE NOW, ARCHITECTURE LATER **a practice-based investigation of transformational agendas in** **architecture school and beyond**

ABSTRACT

Change Now, Architecture Later delivers a personal and situated insight into architectural education as experienced by current students, graduates and educators motivated to pursue transformational agendas. Focussing on the network I have built up over five years at Natural Building Lab (NBL), I use a mixed-method research approach borrowing from ethnographic, practice-based and performative traditions to investigate how transformational aspirations make the transition from university to practice. Rather than formulating a universal solution for the future of architectural education, the thesis uses a novel set of methods to investigate architectural education through the experiences and actions of those directly involved. It documents an approach to architectural education rooted in collectivity, student empowerment and practical experimentation, thereby contributing to institutional knowledge that can drive wider transformation processes. Furthermore, the thesis provides a vehicle for me to rigorously challenge and critically reconstruct my practice as an architect, teacher and researcher. By pursuing the trajectories of our students and graduates from university into early practice, I aim to understand what educators can do to better support them in pursuing transformational agendas in the university and beyond.

And we all need better support because, as the increasingly dire warnings of scientists and policymakers continue to remind us, we are not doing enough. These urgent narratives for environmental, social and disciplinary change have accompanied current students, graduates and younger educators throughout their studies and careers. Many of this generation expect architecture to provide a path for them to progress transformational agendas in the context of what Ezio Manzini calls “life projects”, projects which increasingly reflect collective goals and values rather than individualistic ones. Realising this potential should be a priority for practice and university alike. Yet still, too often, teaching approaches are overly hierarchical or reductive, focusing on standards, materials and approaches that are more likely to reproduce what teachers experienced during their own studies and careers rather than the uncertain future that will face the next generation of planers. While the freedom of university learning has always existed in an ever-perceived tension with the constraints of mainstream practice, the current climate of constant crisis is causing this “practice gap” to widen at an alarming rate. This forces progressive institutions to compensate for some of the apparent deficits of mainstream practice by pursuing critical social and environmental agendas in cooperations and formats that can run against mainstream trends and economic concerns. Here, approaches such as live projects, DesignBuild, service learning or Public Interest Design involve students in real projects with partners that can currently only be feasible within the architectural education framework. This freedom allows institutions such as NBL to act as crucial incubators for new forms of practice and professional identity that can potentially drive change in the profession. Some graduates experience the practice gap acutely after they finish their studies as they are confronted with a choice: What is the best way to realise their aspirations? as an agenda setter in one of the many forms of alternative spatial practice or through professional accreditation and experience in an established office?

For many, these questions deeply relate to building a stable narrative of the self that can integrate transformative personal aspirations with the realities of navigating an increasingly diverse and often disillusioning professional landscape. To explore this dynamic, I draw on contemporary theories of social practice, change and identity while applying ethnographic methodologies such as interviews, critical reflection, photo-elicitation and reflective practice. These chapters are interspersed with practice elements that deliver new thematic impulses using artistic and performative methods, including portrait photography, photojournalism, film and exhibition that deliver new media-specific challenges and insights. This approach makes a case for practice-based research focusing more on the process than the product of architectural education, which mirrors NBL’s teaching approach.

CONTENTS

Abstract
Contents

Introduction

Aims of the research
Research approach
Structure of the thesis
Personal Context & Motivation
Institutional Context

Practice Element: Contextual Timeline

Chapter I: Start Somewhere

Introduction to Chapter 1
Challenges for Architecture Practice
Climate Crisis
Dissolving Job Descriptions
Intersectionality/Diversification
New Work
Research in/on Architectural Education
Historical Primer
Alternative Approaches
Live Project Research
Crit as Research Subject
Practice-Gap
Reflection on Chapter 1

Practice Element: NBL Picture Essay

Chapter II: New Ways of Looking

Introduction: Research in Process
Researching Change Processes
Transformative Research (x)
Transformation Research (x)
Transdisciplinarity (?)
Ethnographic Research (x)
Research into Practice
Practice-Based Research (x)
Mixed Methods Research
Performative Research (x)
Artistic Research (?)
Research Methods
Visual Methods (x)
Reflexive Methods (x)
Narrative Methods (?)
Reflection on Chapter 2

Practice Element: Postcards from Practice

Chapter III: Motivations to (not) Practice Architecture

Introduction to Chapter III
Generation Constant-Crisis
Liquid Modernity & Risk Society
Identity, Self-Politics & Life Projects
Generation Theory
Belonging to a Profession
Professions, Vocations and Callings
Building a Professional Identity
Situated Professionalism
Transformative Life Projects
Social Innovation
Climate Justice
Equality

Practice Element: Everyday Architect?

Chapter IV: Same Old or Different?

Practice Element: Portfolio of Struggles

Conclusion

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