CHANGE NOW; ARCHITECTURE LATER
a practice-based ethnographic investigation of the challenges facing architecture graduates in their pursuit of transformative agendas

ABSTRACT

The freedom of university has always existed in tension with the perceived constraints of mainstream practice. The current climate of "constant crisis" is causing this practice gap to widen rapidly. For many graduates, early career experiences and decisions are entangled with building a stable narrative of the self that can integrate their transformative personal aspirations with the realities of navigating an increasingly diverse and often disillusioning professional landscape. What is the best way to realise their aims? As an agenda setter in one of the many forms of alternative spatial practice or as a trusted professional through accreditation and experience in an established office? The practice gap also poses difficult questions for educators: how can they balance transversal competencies with those required for professional accreditation? Change Now, Architecture Later investigates these questions using a practice-based approach focusing on visual ethnographic methods such as photography and film. Working with the network of graduates, colleagues and project partners built up by the author over seven years in teaching, the investigation pursues the trajectories of students and graduates from university into early practice to understand better their motivations, priorities and demands for the benefit of their peers, architectural educators and established practitioners alike.

As the increasingly dire warnings of scientists and policymakers continue to remind us, things are not changing fast enough. Urgent transformative narratives have accompanied current students and graduates throughout their studies. They expect architecture to provide a path for them to progress transformational agendas in the context of life 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 despite an emerging new generation of progressive educators, many students criticise overly hierarchical or reductive approaches and content deficits concerning the climate emergency and post-colonialism, as well as the prevalence of a toxic studio and presentation culture at many institutions. Upon entering mainstream practice, many graduates become disillusioned with architecture's ethical and environmental agendas and its poor track record on gender equality, diversity and working conditions. Many require much convincing that this profession can meet their expectations of a career where they can impact the most pressing issues of our time.

Yet, there is also cause to be optimistic about an architectural education. The results of the recent EU research project "Architectures Afterlive: The Multi-Sector Impact of an Architectural Qualification" highlighted that architecture graduates are well equipped with transferable skills that allow them to succeed in new professions or even totally unrelated sectors. Many soft skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, organisation and an openness to learning, provide architectural graduates with multi-sector mobility that will be valuable in a rapidly changing world. Yet these skills are seldom an explicit part of curriculums, which are required to focus on the design and technical expertise required for professional accreditation as an architect. This long-established balancing act poses a significant challenge for schools of architecture, professional bodies and offices.

In architectural education, live projects and DesignBuild formats can foster new forms of practice and professional identity by empowering students and exposing them to experiences and collaborations demanding different competencies than a studio-based design project. The investigation uses contemporary theories of social practice, change and identity to examine how these experiences influence professional identities through processes of self-actualisation to indicate broader future shifts relevant for professional and educational institutions.

The thesis draws on ideas from practice-based and performative traditions, with the research themes emerging from non-linear experimentation and iteration of methods, approaches and media. Ethnographic methodologies such as interviews, critical reflection, photo-elicitation and reflective practice deliver situated, nuanced and highly personal insights into a specific group of graduates. Theory-based chapters are interspersed with practice elements that deliver new impulses using artistic and performative methods, including portrait photography, photojournalism, film and exhibition with media-specific challenges and insights. The outcome should make a research contribution in the form of an innovative mixed-methods approach and highlight some of the specific challenges facing university educators, professional bodies and practising architects in accommodating the demands of a cohort who are becoming architects in a period of unprecedented upheaval.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What transformational agendas drive architecture graduates, and what lasting influence do collective experiences in live projects exert in their early career decisions with a view to pursuing these aims?

- To what extent can visual ethnographic methodologies provide new specific insights into the motivations and agendas of early career architects that are not sufficiently captured by more traditional social-sciences approaches? What opportunities and limitations do the methods developed in the dissertation offer for educators to understand and improve their pedagogy?

- How does the current societal condition of instability and constant crisis affect graduates' career aspirations as part of their life-politics/projects? What can their experiences transitioning transformative agendas from university to practice tell us about broader shifts in professional identity for architecture graduates going forward?

- What measures can university educators, professional bodies and practising architects implement to better harness the drive and potential of the next generation of graduates who are becoming architects in a period of unprecedented upheaval?

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CONTENTS