

CHANGE NOW; ARCHITECTURE LATER

a practice-based investigation of the tensions between university and practice through the transformative agency of architecture graduates

ABSTRACT

As practice-based doctoral research, Change Now Architecture Later (NOW) delivers a personal and situated insight into the productive/disruptive tension between university and practice through the experiences of a small group of recent graduates from Natural Building Lab at the Technical University Berlin (www.nbl.berlin). The notion of the practice-gap(s) is used to articulate how transformational agendas from the university make the transition into practice through the agency of graduates. Beyond this, the dissertation provides a vehicle for me to reflect critically on the lasting impact and meaning of my teaching practice at NBL over the past six years. The findings describe a new set of values and competencies that constitute the professional identity of these graduates, which will allow them to meet the ever-evolving demands of a world in constant crisis. Change Now, Architecture Later advocates for these new transformative identities, emphasising the need for university and practice to recalibrate the notion of the values and competencies we need to be “good” architects.

In six years at NBL, I increasingly observe driven and talented graduates leaving university with serious doubts about becoming architects. These students expect architecture to offer a platform for them to progress transformational agendas in the context of their life politics (Giddens 1991), which increasingly reflect collective and ecological goals and values rather than individualistic ones. 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 universities. Upon entering mainstream practice, many graduates become disillusioned with architecture’s ethical and environmental agendas and its poor track record on gender, diversity and working conditions. Understandably, many require some convincing that this profession can meet their expectations of a career where they can impact the most pressing issues of our time.

Nevertheless, many graduates feel a solid loyalty to architecture; after all, most have spent at least five years studying to be an architect, a programme of studies promising a stable career in an established and respected profession. 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 contradictions of navigating an increasingly diverse and often disillusioning professional landscape. However, with the signs pointing towards recession and slowdown, compounded by the trend towards dilution and disappearance of traditional job descriptions across all sectors (Susskind and Susskind 2022), these aims may need recalibration. The increasingly short-term nature of today’s job market means that instead of the solid identity promised by a career in an established profession or institution, many graduates’ working lives will be defined by constant change. This volatility can also bring opportunities to form new kinds of situative professionalism, whereby practitioners learn to approach complex problems from different perspectives throughout their careers (Ziemer 2013). This perspective requires us all to reconsider what we should consider a “successful” career in architecture.

Indeed, for architecture graduates, these dynamics can also foster great optimism. Recent research underscores that architecture graduates are well-equipped with transferable skills that enable them to succeed in new professions or even totally unrelated sectors (Michela Barosio et. al 2024). Many soft skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, organisation, and an openness to learning, provide architecture graduates with multi-sector mobility that will be valuable in a rapidly changing world. This diversification of traditional identities and skillsets means that while the

traditional spatial and technical prowess will remain part of some architects' key competency, an increased proficiency in other competencies like communication, moderation, empathy, listening, openness to learning and self-awareness, will allow the next generation of architects to initiate and succeed in structures and change processes that go well beyond the focus of their studies. Yet these competencies are seldom an explicit part of curricula, which are required to focus on the design and technical expertise required for professional accreditation as an architect. In the context of the current shortage of specialised workers, practice often blames universities for not providing "practice-ready" graduates, but considering the doubts outlined above, who is to say that many of the next generation will aspire to this title of architect at all?

The investigation moves between practice-based and practice-led approaches. In some places, research is conducted in the process of practice, while in others, research is conducted in theorising or contextualising this practice. By combining, developing and iterating visual methods such as portrait photography, film, mapping and exhibition with more conventional ethnographic methods such as biographic interview, inductive coding and photo-elicitation, I make claims to knowledge in the "language of my practice" (Haseman 2006), generating media-specific challenges and insights. This is reflected in the thesis structure, which oscillates between theory-based chapters and practice elements. The outcome should make a research contribution in the form of an innovative mixed-methods approach and looks to answer a question that will be familiar to all those in architectural education—what does it mean to teach the way we do?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Can visual ethnographic methodologies provide new specific insights into graduates' motivations and agendas that are not captured by more traditional social-sciences approaches? What opportunities and limitations does the mixed-method design-driven approach offer for investigating dynamic and process-orientated research questions?
- How is the current poly-crisis affecting the ability of work and profession to act as stabilising influences in our lives? Which new models for professionalism and professional identity are emerging from this societal condition?
- What transformational agendas drive architecture graduates, and how are these manifested in experiences that reaffirm or hinder their motivation to practice architecture as part of their life-politics/projects? Around which themes or practice gaps does a dissonance develop, and what does this say about the productive/disruptive tension between university and practice?
- What do their doubts reveal about the contradictions at the heart of the architecture mindset, and which new competencies, values, and professional identities do graduates embrace to overcome them? What can university educators, professional bodies and practising architects learn from their struggles and successes to better support the next generation in pursuing transformational agendas throughout their careers?

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Bibliography

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TIMELINE

May

Writing Chapter IV

Plan Chapter V and final stretch

Code Interviews

Abstracts/Articles/Applications...

June

Finish Chapters IV & V

Finish practice elements

July

Write Conclusion

Finalise Everything

August

Proofreading

Puffer

September

Submission

Become father

December

Defence

Exhibition