

## DESIGN STUDIO PEDAGOGY: HORIZONS FOR THE FUTURE

By: *Ashraf M. Salama and Nicholas Wilkinson (editors)*

(The Urban International Press, Gateshead, United Kingdom. 2007) ISBN 18728110904

### ASSESSING ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION'S 'CROWN JEWEL'

Michael J. Crosbie



The design studio has been the centerpiece of architectural education for more than a century and a half. It was inherited from an earlier method of educating architects, the *atelier*, where future designers studied under a master architect in his studio. The Ecole des Beaux Arts formalized this system of education, and contemporary architecture programs continue its use. The studio--as a place and as a

form of pedagogy--is so central to architectural education that most educators don't even begin to question its authority. For professors, students, and practitioners, the studio is like the air we breathe—it surrounds us, it gives us life as designers, and it is essential to our formulation as architects. In their pivotal examination of architectural education in the U.S. more than a decade ago, *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice*, Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang identified the studio as an educational paradigm that other disciplines, such as engineering and business, should consider in the education of their own professionals. For Boyer and Mitgang, the studio offered the ideal setting for integrating knowledge—a place where synthesis and application, reflection and action, occurred simultaneously, joining theory and praxis.

That, at least, is the ideal. But any architectural educator will admit to the design studio's shortcomings. It's often a mysterious business. At the beginning of the semester, students and their teachers fill the studio, anticipating the magic and mayhem that happens there. Students blossom in their architectural identities,

and professors gain new insights into the process of teaching and being taught. The studio seems to occupy a locus between home and prison, a place of salvation and damnation, the site of triumph and humiliation. Unlike any other forum for education, the studio takes on an independent life, with its rules, traditions, and revelations. Out of it, in ways that we don't fully understand, students become architects.

Over the years, especially during the last half of the last century, much has been written about the architecture studio and its pedagogy. The turbulence of much of that period was reflected in the studio and its changing role in training architects for a society in flux. The studio continues to be a focal point for experimentation, reflection, invention, and reaction. A new publication brings together some of the most thoughtful, helpful, and provocative ideas about the architecture studio and how it can be adapted. *Design Studio Pedagogy: Horizons for the Future*, edited by Ashraf M. Salama and Nicholas Wilkinson (both of whom are architects and architectural educators), brings under one cover 23 contemporary articles by 25 architectural educators from around the world who consider the special nature of the design studio, how it is changing, and how it might change in the future.

Salama and Wilkinson, both of whom have written extensively about architectural education, organize the collection under five chapters: 1. Theoretical Perspectives and Positions; 2. Critical Thinking and Decision Making in Studio Pedagogy; 3. Addressing Cognitive Styles in Studio Pedagogy; 4. Community, Place, and the Studio; 5. Digital Technologies and the

Studio. Each chapter opens with a helpful and insightful essay by Salama and Wilkinson on the articles that follow. The book commences with two special contributions, one each by N. John Habraken and Henry Sanoff (both giants in the field of architectural education) that provide historical context for the five chapters that follow. Underlying both essays is the question of power—in the studio, and in the profession at large—woven as a theme throughout the book.

Architectural design continues to be a problem-solving exercise. The types of problems addressed are known as “wicked”: they are not easily defined, they are not simple (not even the “simple” ones), and it is a challenge to declare when they have really been solved. Another helpful dichotomy is the difference between convergent and divergent problems. Convergent problems compile information that leads to a single, correct answer (math problems, for example). But studio design problems are divergent—the information collected, the reflection on that information, and the application of the student's analysis to the problem at hand will lead to many solutions, some better than others, but all applicable to some degree. The book offers examples of how such design studio problems have been approached at different schools, at different times, for a variety of reasons.

Design/build studio problems lend a hands-on experience that includes architecture's physical weight (in a way that paper solutions can never capture). Community-based projects by architecture students and faculty offer the possibility of an actual solution being adopted and realized. Projects pursued in virtual design

studios joined by the Internet, as collaborations of architecture students on different sides of the globe, contain the element of cross-cultural solutions. Research in the studio adds another dimension to its setting as a place for reflective action. And what about the psychology of the studio, and the emotional roller coaster that many students ride as projects wind their way through the semester? An article by Noam Austerlitz and Iris Aravot presents research into how interactions between professors and students, and the students' own perceptions of their place in the studio, shape the studio experience.

Some of the most provocative articles in this book take on the perennial problems of the studio—such as how knowledge gained in support classes can be incorporated in studio to achieve a truly integrative learning experience. Yassar Mahgoub's article about curriculum structure and positioning the design studio as a "capstone" instead of the "core" invites one to reconsider the very nature of the studio in education. Jeffery Haase presents a new paradigm—that of installation art—as a format for studio explorations. And Stephen Kendall calls for an approach to design that is open-ended and distributive, which he believes more faithfully reflects the role of the architect and the nature of how the built environment evolves.

The design studio's resilience amid social and educational tumult suggests that it will not soon disappear. But this valuable collection assembled by Salama and Wilkinson of observations, ideas, theories, and experiments centered on the design studio will surely provoke new discussions, patterns, and

paradigms concerning the crown jewel of architectural education.

Michael J. Crosbie, Ph.D., AIA is the Chairman of the Department of Architecture at the University of Hartford in Connecticut, USA, and writes extensively about architecture, design, and education.

For a professional biography, see contributors to this issue, pages 7-10.