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Citation: Salama, Ashraf and Crosbie, Michael (2020) Educating architects in a post-pandemic world. Common\Edge.

Published by: UNSPECIFIED

URL: <https://commonedge.org/educating-architects-in-a-p...>
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ESSAYS

Educating Architects in a Post-Pandemic World

10.14.2020

By **Ashraf M. Salama, Michael J. Crosbie**

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised a series of questions about the challenges facing the two-centuries-old canons of architectural education, their suitability to a post-pandemic digital world, and what the future of architectural education in the current university system might be.

In a period of less than three weeks, commencing in March, architecture schools around the world made significant decisions to shelve face-to-face learning in physical settings and move to a model in which online teaching and learning, collaboration, engagement and interaction, review and assessment, and celebrating student achievements are the only safe forms of group or collective activity. They were immediately challenged to do everything differently. The situation that schools are facing now, however, is

not just a response to Covid-19. The model that has evolved over two centuries is changing within the space of a few weeks or months. Various reactions and responses to address this challenge are now in progress, within a very fluid scene. All of this remains a work in progress.

Hesitant but hopeful, architecture schools are exploring possibilities to expand from an education-delivery system that aims to graduate students able to meet the needs of the profession to a teaching/learning process that produces people who can create opportunities for themselves through various resources and mechanisms. The effort is to embed self-learning and to offer students multiple learning opportunities, while fostering their capabilities to shift from passive listeners to active learners, from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers. While this is challenging, the prospect is promising; every single program, module, course, or studio in architecture becomes an opportunity for reproduction and reinvention.

Architectural education is passing through a “transitional emergency model” that requires adaptation and mitigation to cope with an unprecedented situation. The situation has presented a number of severe challenges: access to software from off-campus sites along with high-speed broadband or specialist computers for modelling and visualization; students sent back home who face online restrictions; home settings for many instructors that don’t support teaching engagement; internships, co-op programs, and training that are severely limited or non-existent; institutions in the Global South undergoing severe hardships from lack of resources and online infrastructure.

And the impact? The **National Design Studio Survey**, conducted in the U.K. by Alex Wright and Robert Grover of the Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering, University of Bath, gathered views and perceptions of teaching staff and students on the impact of Covid-19 on design studio teaching practices. Representing 25 universities, nearly 800 students, and scores of instructors, a selection of key findings includes:

- Satisfaction with learning fell by 58% when it moved to remote;
- Only 7% of students and 4% of faculty preferred remote delivery over face-to-face teaching;
- Peer learning and support were most negatively affected;
- Studio culture was significantly damaged, along with students’ sense of being part of a community, interacting with other year groups, and motivation support from others;
- Most students surveyed highlighted the essential social nature of architectural education and recognized the studio’s physical environment as necessary to learning;
- Mental health impacts from isolation and lack of peer support were heavily emphasized; and

- Working remotely highlighted resource disparity for delivering professional architectural education.

While these results can't be generalized to architectural education globally, they provide an excellent preliminary platform for trying to conceive future post-pandemic architectural education and design studio teaching and learning.

No one knows if the situation will ever return to “normal” pre-pandemic conditions. Current discussions are centered on a “new normal” that represents unfamiliar or atypical conditions that will eventually become stable, usual, or expected. What this demonstrates is that we're reacting to change with a wishful hope to stay the same. But traditional architectural education was already challenged, and it has lost its stability forever in universities that are **urged to drop all face-to-face teaching**.

In his classic early-1970s book *Beyond the Stable State*, educator and philosopher Donald Schon introduced the notion of the “loss of the stable state” while calling for the creation of adaptive systems. Clearly we've been living through such a time before the pandemic, when stable views about occupations, religions, organizations, and value systems are windswept. Covid-19 has generated further significant implications to the loss of the stable state.



Image via TEDxWellington.

Deans and heads of schools of architecture must recognize that there will be no stable state, and that schools should become adaptive systems that do not strive to stay the same. They should embed change, flexibility, and adaptation as part of their curriculum structure, design studio practices, and

teaching and learning processes. While the past six months have focused our thinking primarily on just how to operate (and this might continue for a while), a long-term view and aspirational ambitious *genus* now needs to take place. An urgent effort to envision what post-pandemic architectural education will look like is crucial.

The Covid-19 crisis is an opportunity to examine some of the negative rituals and outdated tendencies inherited from the past that continue to characterize architectural education. There are many, but let's consider two here. When teaching any body of knowledge, there's a tendency to present it as a body of facts and architectural theories, and as a process of criticism. Knowledge is usually presented to students in a retrospective way—an extensive exhibition of the work of an architect over time. A second mode is to offer students hypothetical experiments in the form of design projects where many contextual variables are neglected or simply ignored. There's a focus on offering ready-made interpretations of the built environment rather than developing a student's abilities to explore issues associated with real-life conditions, often beyond their control.

Rethinking modes of learning from the everyday urban environment and the focus on person/environment interaction is another opportunity. If pandemics become annual events with lockdown periods during the academic year, how can we ask students to learn from a city, or visit buildings to critique and learn from? This would require a redefinition of architecture and the built environment as educational objects that one needs to be subjected to, or situated within, a specific method of teaching.

There's a continuous and sustained focus on the content of knowledge and the "explicit curriculum" offered students. But there's an opportunity to re-examine the "hidden curriculum"—an appreciation of unstated values, attitudes, and norms that stem tacitly from the social relation of the educational setting and the content of work. We're now operating in a new learning setting, and thus critiques of the new "hidden curriculum" and associated ethical practices, engagement protocols, and reduction of the power of the educator are critically needed. For instance, architectural education in the "carrot and stick" style—punishment and reward using tests and exams and marks and grades—needs to be revisited with a focus on actual learning experiences and new forms of assessment of design projects and assignments.

In any discussion about architectural education, the starting point is always the legacy model and its variations, which continues to dominate, overshadow, and suppress opportunities to recognize historic, regional architectural traditions overlooked or undervalued in the West. Our new opportunity is to engage with the global discourse on decolonization—primarily the possibilities to decolonize the curriculum through expansion, and exploring and introducing a diverse body of knowledge not necessarily

based on Western architectural authority and the established Western canons of design studio teaching. The recent Common Edge article “[Why Don’t We Teach Chinese Architecture?](#)” is just one manifestation of this possibility. And the growing interest in new concepts evolving from other disciplines—including environmental psychology, disaster psychology, public health, biophilia and engagement with nature—should be integral to new design-teaching practices. This goes with the shift from large-scale construction projects to building adaptation, remodeling, and retrofitting to accommodate emerging working and living styles in a post-Covid-19 world.

A final word: We’re facing an important moment in the history of architectural education. Addressing the challenges could eventually lead to changing a tradition that has continued for centuries. Yet we can’t face the future with what we’ve inherited from the past, or with a university system based on a past developed in the context of 18th-century European Enlightenment and the economic circumstances of the Industrial Revolution. While previous experiences need not be forgotten, the recognition of the loss of the stable state is the key starting point. There are plenty of opportunities to reshape the future of architectural education. These need to be taken forward by academics, students, practitioners, and our already-evolving institutions.

Featured image via Iowa State University Library Special Collections and University Archives.

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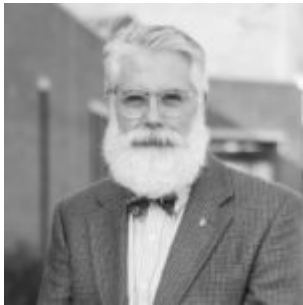
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