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# embedding professionalism in architectural education

inquiry, reflection and judgment throughout professional development



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The professional education of architects may have never fully aligned with the reductive pedagogies of the modern university. Schon (1985) argued that architecture is rooted in the apprenticeship tradition, a curriculum that integrates knowledge, skills and attributes towards the resolution of complex, situated, often 'wicked' problems. Schools of architecture are similarly expected to develop such applicable real-world expertise; in this respect, architectural education contrasts sharply with the teaching of 'pure' subjects that are more focused on abstraction and single solutions.

The pragmatist educator Dewey observed the contradictions of educating students towards professional accreditation. In his time, normative routes to the professions included private colleges focusing on the training of practical skills or, alternatively, universities that favoured theoretical discourse. Dewey argued that neither model was satisfactory, as professional development demanded a symbiotic and complex interrelationship between theory and practice. As an advocate of the modern research-intensive university, Dewey argued that professional disciplines should emphasise theory over practice within the taught curriculum, yet he was unequivocal that this theory should be practically applied to producing professional knowledge for societal benefit of. Shulman (2005), writing 90 years later, argued that professional education had barely improved over the intervening time, with professional courses now absorbed into higher education. The sharp focus on research and theory in universities continued to neglect practical aspects of the professional curriculum. He consequently highlighted the increasing importance of the internship as the sole locus for applying practical knowledge. Stevens (1998) continued this argument, focussing upon architecture education and questioning whether universities are equipped for, or even interested in professional practices, with research-credentialed academics often having insufficient contact with the 'real world' to contextualise authentic learning. Meanwhile practitioners, used to acquiring knowledge in practice, are denied academic positions through their perceived lack of scholarly outputs. Practitioners who find university posts struggle to remain as current as counterparts in practice, often carrying heavy teaching loads that mitigate against conducting research, lowering their comparative status as academics in the view of the modern aspirant university (Till 2008, Stevens 1998).

Hence, architecture schools have become increasingly prioritised theoretical studio design projects at the expense of practical professional content in the curriculum. While creative studio design skills are applauded, key aspects of authentic architectural practice are either subsumed or ignored, particularly

the managerial, entrepreneurial and leadership skills associated with collaborative practice and project procurement (Dutton, 1991; Cuff 1991; Webster, 2006; Boyer and Mitgang, 1996). Graduates must rapidly learn these skills upon entering the profession, with many experiencing stress through this dissonance between academia and practice (Cuff, 1991). Newman (1980, cited in Salama, p66) opines that architectural education produces severely disorientated practitioners, ignorant of the values of the client group that they will ultimately serve. It could be argued that this assertion remains current, with students narrowly focusing on form-making, rather than the development of a wider understanding of the social, economic and ethical contexts of professional architectural practices (Marrs, 2015; Till 2008; Dutton 1991).

Increasingly, educationalists argue that universities must develop curricula that synthesize the often antagonistic fields of research and teaching (Healey and Jenkins 2008; Till, 2008; Rendell, 2015). As the research agenda of universities continues to be prioritised, professionally-focused and academically validated research strategies for schools of architecture are becoming essential (Boyer, 1996). To effect this change, academics must identify and illuminate the full range of disciplinary-specific research activities that employ architectural practice's signature methods and processes. Research in architecture schools can be narrowly focused upon historical-interpretive methodologies, reflecting humanities and arts practices (Stevens, 1998). The imaginative and rigorous application of design and practice-based research could help satisfy the research demands of the academy as well as the practice-focused inquiries conducted by professional practitioners. Furthermore, staff / students collaborations towards co-creation of inquiry-led projects encourages reflective practice and avoids uncritical connoisseurship. Such applicative research is increasingly recognised as bona fide scholarship within progressive universities; however, in architecture this approach appears to remain under-valued. Reframing architectural problems as appropriate research questions demands explicit discussion of process and methods; authentic situated problems may also ensure that this essential service activity can positively impact on communities and society in general, raising the subject's status with academic managers. Importantly, students will be exposed to authentic wicked and complex problems and learning that hypothetical projects fail to fully offer. Real-world professional practices, social skills and ethical judgments can be addressed within the scaffolded environment of the institution, supported through contact with other stakeholders, contexts and processes that lie beyond institutional boundaries. Although architecture schools aspire to replicate authentic practices, chiefly through the setting of live projects, the research potential of such approaches often remains untapped. Professional practice as inquiry may help dissolve the entrenched, often toxic divisions between research, teaching, practice and service (Boyer, 1990)

Increasing student fees and the resultant burden of debt has led to university courses being scrutinised for the validity of the students' learning experience with respect to their future employability in architecture. The RIBA's Education Review is encouraging UK schools of architecture to develop programmes that expand the number of pathways to accreditation for aspiring architects, focusing upon closer alignment to professional practice. Potentially, students may wish to intersperse their years of study with valuable office-based experiential learning. Currently, professional practice experience (PPE) is not credit-bearing for architecture students in the UK. Such accreditation is validated in other fields and it is becoming increasingly important that professional experience, work-based learning, and critical reflection can be incorporated within architecture studies as legitimate, situated and relevant educational methods. A balanced combination of academic, work-based, and professional practice learning has the potential to build expertise, as well as to develop the extensive set of literacies, competencies and attributes that are essential to practice. Architecture may yet realise its potential as an exemplar of professional vocational education in the modern university, valued for espousing collaborative learning-through-doing towards the service of society beyond the institution.

### **Recommended further reading**

- 1 Boyer, E.L & Mitgang, L.D. *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice: A Special Report*. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Princeton N.J., 1996
- 2 Cuff, D. *Architecture: the Story of Practice*. M.I.T. Press, Cambridge MA, 1991
- 3 Dutton, T.A. *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy*. Bergin & Garvey, New York, 1991
- 4 Schon, D.A. *The Design Studio: An Exploration of its Traditions and Potential*. RIBA Publishing, London, 1985
- 5 Shulman, L.S. 'Signature pedagogies in the professions', *Daedalus*, Summer 2005, pp. 52-59
- 6 Stevens, G. *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Education*. M.I.T. Press, Cambridge MA, 1998

### **Paul Jones Biography**

Professor Paul Jones studied architecture at Manchester University, where his career in teaching and practice also commenced. Having enjoyed international success in architectural design competitions, Paul joined Northumbria University in 2003, and was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2011 in recognition of outstanding contributions to architectural education. Paul is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), academic member of the RIBA Education Committee, Chair of RIBA Visiting Boards at home and overseas, a reviewer for the Higher Education Academy, and a current and former external examiner at numerous schools of architecture in the UK.

### **Peter Holgate Biography**

Dr. Peter Holgate studied architecture at Liverpool and Oregon, and practiced in London, San Francisco, Frankfurt, and Newcastle upon Tyne. Formerly a Director for FaulknerBrowns Architects, he was responsible for the delivery of several award-winning projects. He has taught architecture at Northumbria University since 2005, currently acting as Associate Professor / Director of Learning and Teaching. He is Senior Fellow / Academic Associate of the Higher Education Academy, member of the Association of Architectural Educators, executive committee member of the Assessment in Higher Education network, and external examiner for the Architects Registration Board, Robert Gordon, Bath and VIA Universities.