

# ***t r a n s l a t i o n***

*from understanding to misreading and back again*

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# **The Architecture Design Studio: Student Perceptions of the Culture**

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Architectural design is the most important component of architecture programs in terms of time spent and curriculum emphasis, making design studios the core of architecture programs (Nicol & Pilling, 2000). Although attempts are made to introduce other subjects, design takes up almost 80% of students' time (Akin, 2002). Architecture programs are structured around developing design skills through a series of design studio courses during the program, usually two studio courses per year (Correa, 1997). Students work on projects assigned by the faculty who act as clients as well as critics (Akin, 2002). Jarrett (2000) stated that the design studio "works as a laboratory where design methodology is contained, artificially controlled and frequently prescribed with guaranteed success" (59). He attributed this situation to the confinement of the design process within the studio such that students are often isolated from real life.

Clearly, the design studio is where architecture students spend a majority of their time during the program. It becomes important to understand the culture of these spaces that are an important part of students' lives and to evaluate their perceptions of this culture to provide the optimal environment for their personal and professional development. This concern defines the underlying aim of this study: to understand student perspectives of the design studio, and consequently propose strategies that may be incorporated to provide a productive and nurturing environment for students.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative research was conducted at two architecture programs accredited by the National Architecture Accreditation Board ([www.naab.org](http://www.naab.org)). Data collection involved observations in the design studios and focus group interviews with students at both schools. Observations were conducted over three visits at each school for three to four hours each. The intention was to understand the organization of the studios and the dynamic among students, and between students and professors in the studio. Notes from observations were recorded as field notes.

Six students were randomly selected at both schools to participate in focus group interviews. All six students participated from School A and five students participated from School B. Semi-structured focus group interviews were aimed at identifying students' perceptions of the design studios and other concerns they wished to discuss about the culture of the studios. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Data analysis comprised of content analysis of observation field notes and interview transcripts. Comments associated with studio culture were analyzed to identify the views and concerns of participants about their design studios.

## Findings

Data analysis indicated two varying opinions about the design studio. Both groups agreed that they spend numerous hours in the design studio working on their projects and interacting with their peers. While some students mentioned that they reaped immense positive benefits from the rigor of the design studio and the social interaction, others expressed concern because of the mental and physical stress experienced as a result of the work load.

During the focus group interview at School A, Lisa commented that “it is good to be able to work with people, to be able to bounce ideas off of each other.” She added that the culture taught her a lot about working with peers in an office and also helped during the design process. She said, “You know, when you come across a problem that you are trying to solve and if you are not sure that something is working for you, or something you can ask others and say what do you think about this and then help out each other.” Other students talked at length about the stress caused by extended hours spent in the studio working on projects to meet deadlines.

Several student participants in this study talked about the design studio as a place where they learned important lessons from their peers and, more importantly, found a social structure. At School A, Lisa and Joey mentioned that professors encourage students to work in the studio so they can help each other with projects. Lisa thought that it was a great learning experience for the future when they will work on teams as professionals in architecture firms. Joey said that “it will carry on into our next job opportunity or grad school wherever you go and it will enhance communication skills and help us become better people.” Summer (School A) recalled her experience of leaving school for two years after completing her third year. She said that coming back to the fourth year after the break led her to lose the camaraderie she had developed with her classmates and explained that “there is a difference socially as far as starting out and going through than stopping and coming back and coming in new.” In sum, students valued the social support and interaction with professors in the design studio as important positive reinforcement in their development as professional architects. During the interview with Professor Karen at School A, she said that she tries to stress collaboration in the design studio. The project she assigned for the semester required students to work together, share ideas, and exchange information. Each student was designing one of five blocks in downtown and effective completion of the project required all students’ work to come together on the entire site.

While several students said that they had gleaned important insights from the culture of design studios, they also voiced their anxiety due to the long hours and late nights involved in the program. Summer (School A) said she had to leave after three years in the program to take a two-year break because she was “stressed out” and “couldn’t take it any more.” Lauren (School A) talked about a car accident when driving home after a late night in the studio because she fell asleep at the wheel. Lisa agreed and recalled her stress-related sickness, emphasizing that it is unhealthy for students to stay awake all night or through

entire weekends to complete projects. She expressed that the school may be using it as a means of testing students' survival abilities as a "weeding out process." She said, "It is a survival of the fittest and it doesn't matter how good you are at architecture. As long as you can make it through the program, you know, if you can endure it, then you are in." When I asked students to talk about the requirements of the National Architecture Accreditation Board, Stanley (School B) mentioned that there may be a requirement related to studio culture which was incorporated after a student committed suicide because of the stress of the program. Joey defended the professors during this discussion at School A, advocating the work load as a means of teaching students time management skills.

### Implications for Architecture Education

The structure of design studios and the time spent there are topics which need extensive attention in architecture pedagogy. Discussions with several educators and my personal experiences teaching a design studio have offered some strategies that may be incorporated to accentuate learning in the design studio and kindle a passion for architecture among students.

#### Theories and Philosophy of Design

One possible means of making students aware of the extent to which their design decisions affect occupants and society may be to imbibe an understanding of philosophy and theories in design. Subjects like environmental psychology will be beneficial in fostering a respect for the time, effort, and logical reasoning that design decisions deserve. In my Environmental Psychology class I have several students in their senior year of interior design. I found students developing a more respectful perspective towards their profession as they learned about the impact of their designs on occupants' psyches, behavior, and long term personality development.

Philosophies in design span several centuries and discuss multiple facets of architecture. A discussion of these philosophies is beyond the scope of this paper but their application may be discussed. An understanding of philosophical viewpoints in architecture could lead to a greater understanding of the way design decisions affect individual occupants, as well as society as a whole. This will lead to a greater respect for the profession and, consequently, for the amount of time and effort involved in the creation of designs that will have a positive impact on their occupants and the society they inhabit.

### Time Management

The implications of this study are not a reorganization of the syllabus in architectural design but a reorganization of the way this syllabus is administered. The proposal is not to assign projects that require less time and effort but, in consideration of the concerns raised by students in this study, a more structured approach to the administration of projects. It may be said that our responsibilities

as educators have grown to include teaching students to utilize their time effectively and to prioritize their commitments.

In my first-year design studio, I found stricter time lines and a clearly articulated step-by-step breakdown of the design process to be extremely effective. Assigning students a time line to follow in the development and completion of their projects has helped students stay on schedule and complete projects on time without burning midnight oil the week before the due date. Students understand the process by articulating the outcomes to achieve by the end of each week. The long term implications of this study need further study. I hope that following this structure in the first-year design studio will assist them in future studios by helping them plan the time required for each step in the design process.

### Stress Management

In speaking with student participants in this study, stress appeared to be a major contributor to their unhealthy and unsatisfactory experiences in their design studio. Can exercises in stress management be incorporated in design studios to provide students the ability to de-stress and relax during the long hours they spend on their drawing boards? Can architecture departments collaborate with physical therapy or similar department to incorporate classes in the syllabus that will teach students basic exercises to relieve themselves of physical and mental fatigue so they may continue to work effectively on their projects without feeling stressed? Practices in stress management like meditation, and breathing exercises may be incorporated in architecture programs to improve students' attitudes towards their personal well being, which would subsequently extend to considerations of the well being of their clients.

### Conclusion

The culture of design studios emerged as an important positive as well as negative factor in this study. Some students were appreciative of the support structure that the design studios provide and the teamwork and time management skills they acquire through interaction with their peers. Others expressed discontent, attributing it to the psychological stress resulting from the long hours spent working on their projects. How students respond to the stress they experience becomes an issue that architecture education needs to address. An essential part of incorporating activities to augment positive experiences in the design studio is to make students aware of the value associated with the profession and the extent to which architects' design decisions affect individuals and society. Strategies that architecture education may consider include, but are not limited to, incorporating studies of theories and philosophies in design to foster a deeper and more respectful understanding of the profession and its implications on society, time lines articulated with a detailed description of the design process, and stress management exercises. These ideas could be beneficial not just for architecture programs but other programs involving studio

work. The effectiveness of these strategies need further study but their incorporation may be the first step towards relieving students of the “stressed out” syndrome.

## References

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