

Decolonizing Studio Pedagogy Through Critical Theory and Integrated Research Methods -- A Curriculum Reimagination

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The School of Architecture at The University of Utah has engaged in curriculum reimagination for the last three years. At the heart of this faculty-wide effort is the mission to make architects civic entrepreneurs and socially responsible global citizens. In response, we have sought to broaden our disciplinary horizons. Our collective has envisioned an integrated curriculum in which research methods and critical theories from many disciplines such as literature, queer theory, ethnography, or indigenous studies become the primer for design. Students learn that research is a systematic inquiry directed towards the creation of knowledge, and that each method produces different ways of knowing. Our primary aim is to disrupt the notion that the acquisition and application of knowledge is somehow universal, as opposed to the result of a particular set of cultural constructs. The “integrated model” with research methods at its base allows us to move towards a larger project of decolonizing design pedagogy. By decolonizing we mean braiding together Western and other ways of knowing to transform the imagination and structure of design practice and the academy. The metaphor of braiding in this case maintains the identity of each mode of knowledge, while strengthening the whole by introducing different critical views of land and property, design and project delivery, plus client and community¹. Placing diverse critical theories as well as both western and indigenous research methods as the foundation of the curriculum allows us to ask difficult questions about how architecture can contribute to the cultural survival, resilience, and healing of cultures devastated by European Enlightenment, the foundation of modern education, with its roots in racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and economic exploitation of the colonized world.

The School of Architecture at the University of Utah has engaged in a curriculum reimagination for the last three years. At the heart of this faculty-wide effort is the mission to make architects civic entrepreneurs and socially responsible global citizens. This goal demands a radical disruption of the domination of western scientific rationality in architecture that has led to technocratic thinking, white and male-centric definitions of professionalism

and expertise, and of course, the object fetish that dominates studio pedagogy.

Until recently the architecture curriculum inherited by our faculty had been focused on a loosely placed-based aesthetic parading itself as an ethic, the preparation of students for employment in corporate practice, and an emphasis on economic competitiveness within the local marketplace served through languages of professionalism and leadership. We felt that these approaches, while widely accepted and practiced in architecture schools across the United States, fundamentally suffer in their inability to acknowledge the contingent nature of architectural practice or its political and cultural implications. These inherited values are in keeping with the discipline's dominant attitude towards architecture practice as a rational, industrial, and capitalist mode of producing buildings and spaces, applied universally to all places and for all people regardless of cultural context.

This inheritance is coupled with another long-cherished legacy, that of community engagement in our curriculum. A commitment to community engagement has distinguished our architecture school since Bob Bliss founded the graduate program in the 1960s and brought with him a citizenship-focused teaching philosophy carried over from his days matriculating at Black Mountain College. However, there is a disjuncture between the needs of citizens and the demands of the market. There is a disconnect between the aspirations of service and activist based architecture and skills aimed at placing students for employment in corporate practice. This means that our learning outcomes have been at cross purposes. For example, our social service agenda neither questions the outdated paradigm of the architect as an isolated genius, nor questions the uncritical discourses on the public good in contemporary practice. This leads to a corrupt and distorted approach to community engagement. Rooted in our critique is that community-engaged practices conducted within the existing Eurocentric frameworks are inherently compromised. These frameworks delegitimize the knowledge systems of all non-European cultures as inferior. So, when we send our students to work on behalf of communities that have been compromised by Western modernity, they can only through their training continue to discredit other ways of being in the world.

We hoped that curriculum reform might allow us to situate community engagement within a critique of our inherited practices pervasive in the discipline. This is a necessary step

towards decolonizing our teaching. By decolonizing, we follow the indigenous lawyer, Sákéj Henderson's conception of braiding together Western and other ways of knowing to transform the imagination and structure of design practice and the academy². The metaphor of braiding maintains the identity of each mode of knowledge while strengthening the whole, introducing different critical views of land and property, design and project delivery, client and community.

REIMAGINING OUR CURRICULUM

We began the process of reimagining our curriculum with a series of faculty-wide conversations about the specific information, skills, and values required at different teaching levels to graduate socially responsible designers. A smaller group held reading seminars about postcolonial approaches to knowledge production in different disciplines and considered their import for architecture³. The major challenge we identified was the pedagogic model in which the studio stood isolated from all other coursework. In addition, courses that prepared students for employment, such as professional practice and building technology, implicitly contributed to images of architecture as a rational and technocratic practice. We mapped our new course offerings and learning objectives into an integrated model to make studio dependant on ideas and information gathered in other courses and to incorporate a critical and postcolonial lens into technology and professional practice course work.

We also identified the challenge of retention of information and skills by students from semester to semester that hampered scaffolding in subsequent years. There was collective agreement that integrating courses would address this problem. Further, we considered that the integrated model acts as a bridge to faculty who are new to decolonizing frameworks but open to incorporating them as well as those who have yet to explore them at all.

The discipline, through organizations like the Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative, has already begun the process of decolonizing architectural education in the areas of history, theory, and criticism (HTC). Recent scholarship provides enough material for challenging the art and architectural cannon. A focus on different technologies of globalization, brings into visibility the interconnectedness of the world through time, the contribution of different people to our collective stock of knowledge and critiques of modernity. By probing architectural practice through gender, race, and queer theory, our HTC seminars explain to students how architecture can serve as an instrument of discrimination and the naturalization of normative values. The critiques of disability studies and indigeneity are particularly potent in showing the complicity of the built environment in creating disadvantaged communities. These courses took a lead in providing a critical lens for the questions being asked in studios, technology, and professional practice classes.

Our first step was to develop a series of integrations between studio, building technology, and communications led by courses in HTC. We transformed stand alone HTC seminars

into what we call research methods classes. These engage critical thinking not as an end but as a guiding means in the process of solving a design problem. This transformation of critical discourse into a research method allowed us to view a design problem in a broader philosophical context rather than primarily a question of functional and aesthetic choices. This also allowed us to introduce students to an understanding of how knowledge is produced and how disciplinary boundaries have often controlled the types of knowledge that are incorporated into architectural practice. Different research methods lead to different questions, solutions, and ways of knowing. The limits of each method show the interdependence of the research framework to design solutions. One cannot answer a question that one has not asked. The goal of the architectural research method approach is to make our students self-sufficient in the face of a design problem. Regardless of their familiarity within a frame of reference, our students should know how to rethink and subvert a standard architectural brief. In addition, this contributed to our goal of decolonizing architecture design pedagogy by explicitly providing students access to the processes and knowledges of different disciplines and cultures. Students are taught to question the limits of any particular method for producing the knowledge that drives the process of design.

We could not rely on the current literature and thinking on architectural research methods, because it imagines architecture as narrowly scientific, and mostly a quantitative, approach to information gathering and decision making within the design process. Instead, our course offerings have incorporated ideas from our readings on decolonizing pedagogies in disciplines as wide-ranging as education, anthropology, and economics. We have engaged critical voices in architecture from Europe, Asia, and indigenous communities across the world. The work of Marie Battiste and Linda Tuhiwai-Smith has been informative in how to incorporate native and non-Western knowledge systems into our own. Architectural historian Mark Jarzombek and architect and educator Chris Cornelius have given us detailed ideas of how they are integrating postcolonial approaches in courses on communication, building technology, and studio work.

Integrated HTC courses that drive the conceptualization of design in our new curriculum include:

1. Critical Approaches to Interdisciplinary Research Methods: In the first studio, at both graduate and undergraduate levels, students undertake a reiterated design problem in a series of charrettes each driven by a different research method.
2. Reflective Research and Analysis of Site: Students explore the impact of a series of different knowledge economies. For example, native landscape intelligence, attitudes to property and placemaking, to question the limits of ecology, program, project, and processes of construction.

3. **Gender, Race, Queer, Disability, and Decolonizing Theories and Methods:** Students use methods from critical theories to explore ways to disrupt the role that architecture plays in internalizing political ideologies and naturalizing distinctions between humans to construct more inclusive programs and projects.
4. **Community-Engaged Methods:** This course introduces historical and theoretical intersections of Community-Engaged Design movements as an alternative to corporate practice. Students learn to identify and understand the values of these movements, and then propose a speculative model that they would employ once out of school.
5. **A Self-Authored Masters Project:** Students develop their own integrated research and design method based on a problematic, site, and program chosen by each student.

Second, we are working to integrate HTC methods and criticism into professional practice courses. This integration expands the breadth of these seminars to include non-corporate practices focused on research, service, and community capacity building. Our goal in developing the professional practice sequence is to provide students with the skills and knowledge that they need to become activist architects. These skills include cultural competencies, the capacity to learn from communities and to approach them with the mindset of an apprentice rather than an expert, methods of grant writing, and implementation of projects not funded by traditional market models.

Finally, we are working to integrate courses laterally within a particular area. For example, by incorporating different aspects of building technology -- structures, building systems, and materials -- in the same course, we can focus on a more holistic understanding of the building as a system within a larger ecological and cultural setting. By braiding together western notions of building technology with knowledge and solutions from more traditional practices students are asked to question our reliance on innovation and advanced technological development as the only solution to global crises. This integration asks students to explore not only how design

decisions impact issues such as sustainability and lifecycle costs, but also how these decisions impact building in conditions of scarcity and the ability of communities to take control of their own resources to ensure cultural resilience. Placing diverse critical theories as well as weaving research methods into the foundation of our curriculum allows us to ask of our students difficult questions that contribute to the cultural survival and resilience of non-Western conforming epistemologies.

DEPLOYMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

With a clear framework for integration and research methods in place, we began implementation in the first semester of the undergraduate architecture major when the students are initiated into the culture of the design process. We were cognizant of the importance of this moment in the professional trajectory of the students. The structures put in place at this point are embodied as what Pierre Bourdieu calls the disciplinary “habitus”-- i.e. dispositions that structure the rest of the students’ academic careers⁴. Accordingly, we developed design problems, lectures, assignments, and workshops that demonstrated how design problems require conceptualization through a methodology. We curated an experience that revealed that there was nothing obvious and universal about any methodology. Sometimes they work in harmony, while at other times they conflict with one another. Further, it drove home the message that innovation in the design process does not happen through the innovation of styles, but rather by wrestling with the infrastructural and systemic nature of design questions. We introduced design problems that required our students to do two things:

1. Intervene and study the most familiar spatial typology with new analytical frameworks.
2. Solve problems for which no known architectural typologies exist and which in fact are a result of normative approaches to spatial organization. New building typologies require students to reject preconceptions and think critically about techniques and strategies to communicate ideas in response.

For the inaugural semester in Fall 2018, we chose to take on bite-size architectural interventions that contribute to Salt

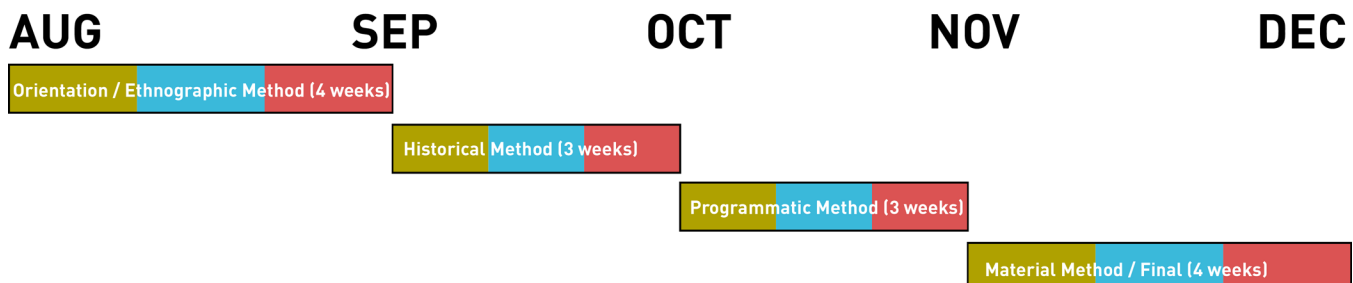


Figure 2. Integrated curriculum combining four research methods to inform communications and studio courses. Image credit: Jose Galarza.

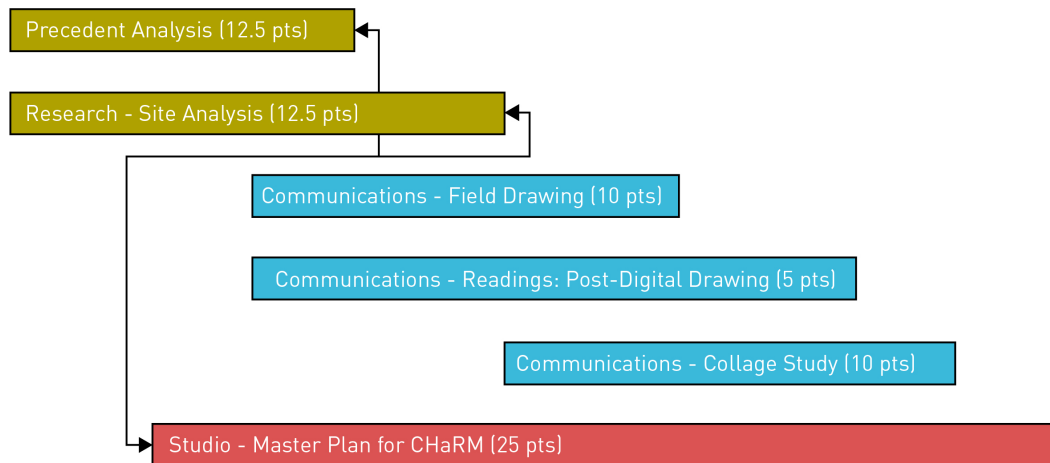


Figure 2. The Integrated courses formed a highly scripted process with very precise assignments. Assignment schedules were coordinated between three classes so that assignments in methods (green), fed into communication (blue) and communication in studio (red). Image credit: Jose Galarza

Lake City's goal to become a Zero Waste City by 2040. "Zero Waste" is a philosophy that requires the redesign of resource life cycles so that all products are reused. The goal is for no trash to be sent to landfills or incinerators. It was a promising design problematic. Its scope could address difficult questions intersecting with economics and politics. Yet, it is a non-partisan issue for this generation of students. Trash is a fundamental problem of the modern world and a legacy of industrialization, a result of modern material production and narrow ways of thinking about technological innovation that has touched most parts of the globe. We worked directly with city officials. This helped move the problematic from the imagined to the real, from abstraction to particularity, from distant to an urgent concern. They also helped us develop distinct design briefs at multiple scales, from the details of a kitchen, to a building, to a city block.

We created a team of three instructors responsible for developing and executing the curriculum of three courses that dovetailed into one cumulative experience. The leading course taught students how to identify a design problem curated through various research methods. While the two other courses, communication and studio, became the testing grounds for representing and translating design solutions most appropriate for a given method. Research was presented and practiced as a systematic inquiry directed towards the creation of knowledge, and that each method produces different ways of knowing. Two of the methods we taught, ethnography and history, have developed in disciplines outside of architecture. Whereas methods like architectural programming and material research are approaches internal to our discipline. Our primary aim was to disrupt the notion that the acquisition and application of knowledge is somehow universal, as opposed to the result of a particular set of cultural constructs.

We met initially to outline and overlay learning objectives that would be reiterated across the courses. We wanted to ensure that each of the three faculty members were saying the same thing in multi-faceted ways through syllabi, course materials, assignments, lectures, workshops, grading rubrics,

and schedule. The faculty created a single integrated syllabus and schedule for all three courses. The total of 20 hours each week was choreographed based on the needs of a particular curricular unit rather than dividing neatly into distinct courses. The sequencing of materials and assignments followed the same pattern, with research methods setting the agenda and communications and studio assignments as the laboratory to apply the method to the design process.

For example, during the Historical Method, we asked students to repurpose a city block as a Center for Hard to Recycle Materials (CHaRM). We chose this typology for its relationship to waste and for its unfamiliarity to students. Students would have to earnestly apply the research method in order to gain traction into the design process. They would be unable to rely on preexisting examples of a CHaRM facility because it is currently an infrastructural typology and has not received much architectural treatment. In addition, the CHaRM allows students to rethink the role of waste in a capitalist market place by seeing waste as a commodity. Students are asked to imagine a facility that will subvert the idea of a shopping mall. As a building typology, malls have been charged to produce desire, encourage consumption, consider shopping as play and entertainment, deliver planned obsolescence, and make the irresponsible production of waste unconsidered. The acronym CHaRM (charm) invites us to instead think of trash exchange as a desirable cultural activity. Accordingly, the master plan needed to situate a proposal where trash is a sought-after commodity, exchange of hard to recycle materials is a form of play, repair as a right, and socialization into the idea that discard can be an act of keeping goods in circulation.

For each research method, including the Historical Method, we began with a lecture as an overview of the possibilities and limits of the method itself. Included are the types of questions and knowledge that are common to the method. The Historical Method included two processes, library research and fieldwork, as a combination of secondary and primary information. The library research was focused on a series of architectural typologies culled from many distinct cultures that touched on

the ideas of commerce and of waste. These included malls, arcades, world expos, bazaars, caravanserai, village fairs, thrift stores, and salvage facilities. What distinguishes our approach from a standard precedent study is that it requires theorization of the attributes of the typology in order to incorporate them into a design study as a form of comparative analysis. Students studied the architectural typologies, not at the level of functions and organization of interior spatial relationships, but at an urban scale and as a particular form of making culture. The focus was on how one introduces a new building typology in a historic neighborhood.

The chosen site is located in an industrial neighborhood that is undergoing a process of gentrification and displacement of families who built it at the turn of the 20th century. Hence, the design challenge was how to offset the impact of a new facility that could accelerate the process of gentrification. The focus of the fieldwork was not just the preservation of the built environment but also the preservation of the social and cultural fabric. It documented social networks and meanings invisible in a study of material fabric alone.

The most effective communication techniques for this method included collage and figure-ground studies. These were presented through lectures and workshops in combination with reading assignments, again connecting ideation and representation back to a given research method. Therefore, participants

in the class when explaining their verbal or visual choices would do so within a well-considered approach to solving the problem. The choice of collage was most appropriate for the historical method because the collage repurposes found images for new representations. It also combines disparate elements into communion with unexpected results. The historical method creates a dialectic relationship between past and present, waste and commerce, trash and desire that is best captured through the technique of collage. Students began the process of design using these techniques to juxtapose their analysis of the historic typologies into the site itself as a way to interrogate current conditions.

The studio served as a culmination of exercises carried out in Methods and Communications. The typology and field studies conducted by the class served as a form of collective knowledge-making that fed into the studio. Studies made connections between the formal qualities and cultural meanings of social spaces whose messages were aligned with the vision of this project. Studio projects were evaluated not on the success of their aesthetic solutions but instead based on the commitment to the method and its realization in a well-presented argument to support design decisions.

Students responded to the coursework immediately. Regardless of the individual weakness or strength of a student, across the board, it was apparent that a syncretic thought process was

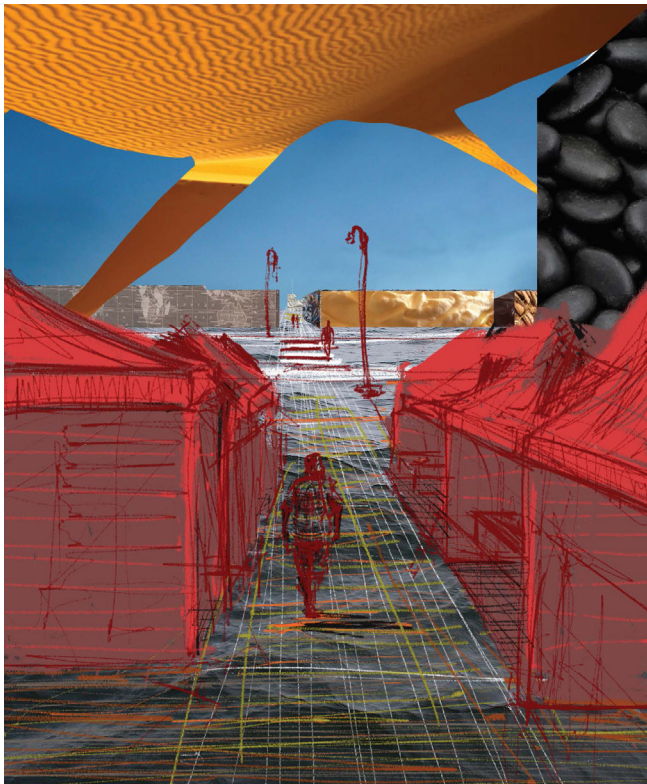


Figure 3, 4. The present age of architectural documentation is dominated by forms of drawing done mechanically. Hence, the purpose of Communication assignments in the Historical Method were to inquire what other possibilities exist to represent architecture, in this case through collage and figure ground. The only hard rule was the exploration through theme: "Reenvisioning trash as objects of desire." Credit Zach Anderson.

unfolding in each of them. They were making connections between theory and design unseen in previous first-year students. Because the students worked in a collaborative as opposed to a competitive environment, they created a commonwealth of knowledge that they were all able to draw upon. The syncretic nature of the teaching model was particularly empowering for all participants. They could see multiple and distinct pathways for entering into a design problem. The immersive experience of this semester opened up the most resistant students to the importance of history and theory for the practice of architectural design. They also came to appreciate the importance of learning from spatial practices developed at different historical moments in different parts of the world.

From the perspective of the faculty, the collaborative model that we asked of the students was something that we modeled ourselves. It required a lot of labor and trust in our co-instructors. This went against the model of academic independence as an uncritical form of individuation. The faculty were required to put our egos aside in order to learn to work with each other and in order to learn from one another. Each faculty member expanded their knowledge. For example, one faculty member learned about the intricacies of historical research, and another faculty member gained the opportunity to teach their first studio and engage studio pedagogy. This process created a rich discourse about the existing structures of the curriculum and contributed to the rigor of faculty research to pedagogy development. In this way, the integrated curriculum became a form of faculty development. However, a challenge for the faculty is that because it is very labor-intensive it requires buy-in to sustain over time.

The level of investment required to produce the integrated research model was akin to the thoroughness demanded of faculty scholarship. All materials were created and archived as teaching kits, vetted for readability in the event of our inevitable absence. The teaching material was assessed through a process of review, both within the teaching cohort and by the full faculty. This produced the atmosphere of shared accountability. We collectively pushed the curriculum's development to resolve the contradictions that inspired the reform.

The discipline of architecture is still predominantly Eurocentric, high-technology oriented, and anti-democratic, despite decades of efforts towards diversification. We are undoubtedly graduating many more women, openly transgender people, and people of color in the field than before. Yet, these new entrants have not transformed professional standards. To succeed, they still assimilate to white, elite, and male standards of decorum and originality. The diverse body of students entering the university system today, therefore, cannot find themselves in architectural curricula. We need to globalize architectural knowledge so that students from different classes and from across the world can see their experiences and their communities being addressed in their training. This new curriculum is a vital first step to align our disciplinary imagination with the diversity of graduates

that we produce. Our efforts will continue to require new research, creative initiatives, student projects, and institutional restructuring that prioritize learning from cultures previously suppressed. The biggest resistance to cultural decolonization comes from our unquestioned belief in professionalization as impersonal, technology as neutral, and equity as assimilation into the dominant value system of the West. We have to accept that the locus of resistance to colonial erasure resides squarely within us as artists, designers, and most of all educators.

ENDNOTES

1. Marie Battiste and Sa'ke'j Henderson, "Indigenizing the Academy," YouTube video, 1:18:01, April 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hnw-G-D4wG8>.
2. Ibid
3. Selected Bibliography of some of the works that we read and discussed as a group:
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4. Pierre Bourdieu, "Structures and The Habitus," in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72-95.