

Addressing othering in architecture education: Learning ethics and empathy

ALEXIS GREGORY

Mississippi State University

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“The talent of imagining human situations is more important for an architect than the gift of fantasizing spaces.” Aulis Blomstedt quoted by Juhani Pallasmaa ¹

This paper posits that ethics and empathy are needed in architecture education, not only in professional practice courses, but throughout the entire curriculum. Research shows that students are more successful and engaged when ethics, empathy, and even agency are included in architecture education. Issues like lack of empathy from faculty-to-student, student-to-student, and student-to-client/community partner will be discussed. Case studies will be presented that show ideas that were explored in undergraduate design studios to impart empathy and ethics using agency to better prepare students. The methodology used in these design studios will also be presented and the results of the explorations will be shared. These methods include discussions about inherent bias, exercises in role-playing, reflections, and pre- and post-surveys to gauge student perceptions and what is learned through these studio experiences.

INTRODUCTION

“We define “othering” as a *set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities.*” ²

The world is getting more hostile as countries are separating themselves from neighbors and allies and refusing entry to desperate refugees. How can architecture education teach empathy and ethics to counteract this coarsening of national and international dialogue in regard to space and the “other”? ³ While architecture programs are trying to increase the diversity of the student body, students are alienated by not having projects and clients that they can relate to. Students should be taught empathy and ethics so they can relate to clients who are different from them and embrace a wider variety of society. Beginning with the Boyer and Mitgang

report *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice* ⁴ and the research of Kathryn Anthony, Sherry Ahrentzen, and Linda Groat in the 1990’s to the work of Thomas Fisher on ethics in architecture, this conversation has been going on for a very long time. Even recently Rashida Ng asked the architecture education community “What Will It Take?” to finally address the issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in architecture education. ⁵

Empathy and ethics cannot start in the profession but must first be taught in architecture programs to prepare students to work in a global society with people who are vastly different than they are. However, as Thomas Fisher noted in his important book *Ethics for Architects: 50 Dilemmas of Professional Practice*, ethics tends to be limited to professional practice courses. ⁶ Additionally, architecture programs can other students by giving them project types in their courses that are not familiar to them and that are not part of their everyday experience, as well as having clients who do not look like them. Students are also not given design projects that encourage ethics and empathy but also do not give them projects that encourage agency. Based on the evolving demographics of architecture students and clients, empathy and ethics need to be interwoven throughout architecture education rather than only in professional practice courses to begin addressing the othering of architecture education.

In one of the many interviews with students conducted by Boyer and Mitgang a student noted that architecture programs needed to emphasize social issues more than they were. Providing for the needs of the community at large and not just building monuments was important. ⁷ Groat and Ahrentzen’s research and conversations with architecture students in 1996 highlighted the differences in perceptions and interests between female students and students of color. Female students were less interested in fame and prestige and more interested in working with non-profits or government to engage in community action. Financial security and social impact were the most important reasons students of color entered architecture as a major. Yet today students of color tend to be the ones who suffer most from financial insecurity in such an expensive major. The students’ interest in social impact is even more

relevant today as students see so many issues from climate change to sexual assault that they are concerned about and want to address in their careers.⁸ However, this paper argues that unless architecture education employs ethics and empathy to both work with these students who have financial issues, and to give them agency in the issues that are important to them, architecture education will continue to lack diversity in the educational system and the profession.

Boyer and Mitgang continued the conversation in 1996 and challenged architecture educators to help students develop ethics and empathy by being sensitive to the needs of others. They recommended the creation of healthy learning communities that could help the students empathize with individuals and entire communities.⁹ They ask if the schools of architecture are a caring place, and it has been seen that even after more than twenty years later this is not the case. The recent global pandemic has laid bare the persistent issues with architecture education and the inequities inherent in a “two-hundred-year-old Eurocentric model”¹⁰ that continues to fail students. The lack of empathy from faculty to student is another issue that plagues architecture education and relates to the question of whether architecture schools are caring places. Students learn early on that they should compete for the attention of the faculty, and are even told by the faculty that they should be in studio all of the time.¹¹ This has a negative impact on student mental health by working too much, and by isolating students from their friends and various perspectives throughout the university. Professional architects get work by networking and building relationships outside of their firms so students should be encouraged to get out of the architecture studio and create lasting relationships with friends and community both for their mental health and their future architectural practice.

Fisher’s book, *Ethics for Architects: 50 Dilemmas of Professional Practice*, was written over ten years ago, and despite the call to arms established in that book, and his “tools for survival” in the 2008 book *Architectural Design and Ethics: Tools for Survival*, architecture education is still moving too slowly to address the issues inherent in the field and society.¹² Recent social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have shined a light on the unethical things that even the most lauded architectural icons have done, yet women and minorities still struggle for equality in both professional and educational settings. Architecture programs that begin to incorporate empathy and ethics, especially using service-learning and social justice, can also support the retention of the women and minorities who are often lost after graduation. Studies show that a “commitment to promoting racial understanding” through community service and service-learning appeals to women and minorities and as a result these diverse groups are more likely to become involved in architecture.¹³

While Fisher used ethics in architectural design to address issues related to climate change, his basis for the use of ethics

still relates to the research conducted as part of this article. Every issue raised by Fisher in *Architectural Design and Ethics: Tools for Survival* is still an issue today and requires more than ever that students are taught about ethics to design for the future. From the increasing wealth gap to a global pandemic, Fisher discussed the issues that are still being dealt with today.¹⁴ Teaching ethics in architecture education has the purpose of giving students a skill set to move forward to change the architecture profession to address these challenges instead of turning a blind eye to them.

Fisher provides a strong argument for the use of ethics, but empathy also needs to be addressed in architecture education. “Architecture and Empathy” authors Pallasmaa, Mallgrave, Robinson, and Gallese examine why empathy is needed in architecture by discussing the lived experience and the understanding of life as well as the understanding of the human form in relation to space.¹⁵ Mallgrave reflects on the physiological aspects of empathy and how this helps people to be “attuned” to one another to better design spaces for others.¹⁶ Robinson highlights the benefits of empathy that includes feeling the experience of someone else which in turn informs the ability of architects and creates more opportunities for potential solutions and actions.¹⁷ Gallese takes the observations of the other authors and places it in the context of the human brain and how humans can be empathetic versus sympathetic, as well as how humans experience the “other” and the existence of others.¹⁸

Introducing empathy and ethics exercises into architecture education can assist in opening the minds of students so that they are better able to approach and solve the issues of the current and future environment. Exercises in role-playing, reflections, and pre- and post-surveys foster discussions with students to aid them in better understanding the viewpoints of others as they design architecture for specific clients and to serve society. This proposal aims to continue the narrative started by Fisher and others to prepare students and give them agency to meditate on what their responses as future architects should be in reference to current and future challenges.

METHODOLOGY

These ideas of ethics and empathy in architecture were used to develop methods to explore and engage undergraduate students in design studios by asking them to think about their inherent biases and to empathize with others as part of their design work.

Service-Learning Studios

Earlier architecture design studios that the author used to explore ethics and empathy were service-learning projects that engaged a community partner. Working with community partners gives students the opportunity to participate in projects that more directly reflect their backgrounds, while working with people who may be different from them racially

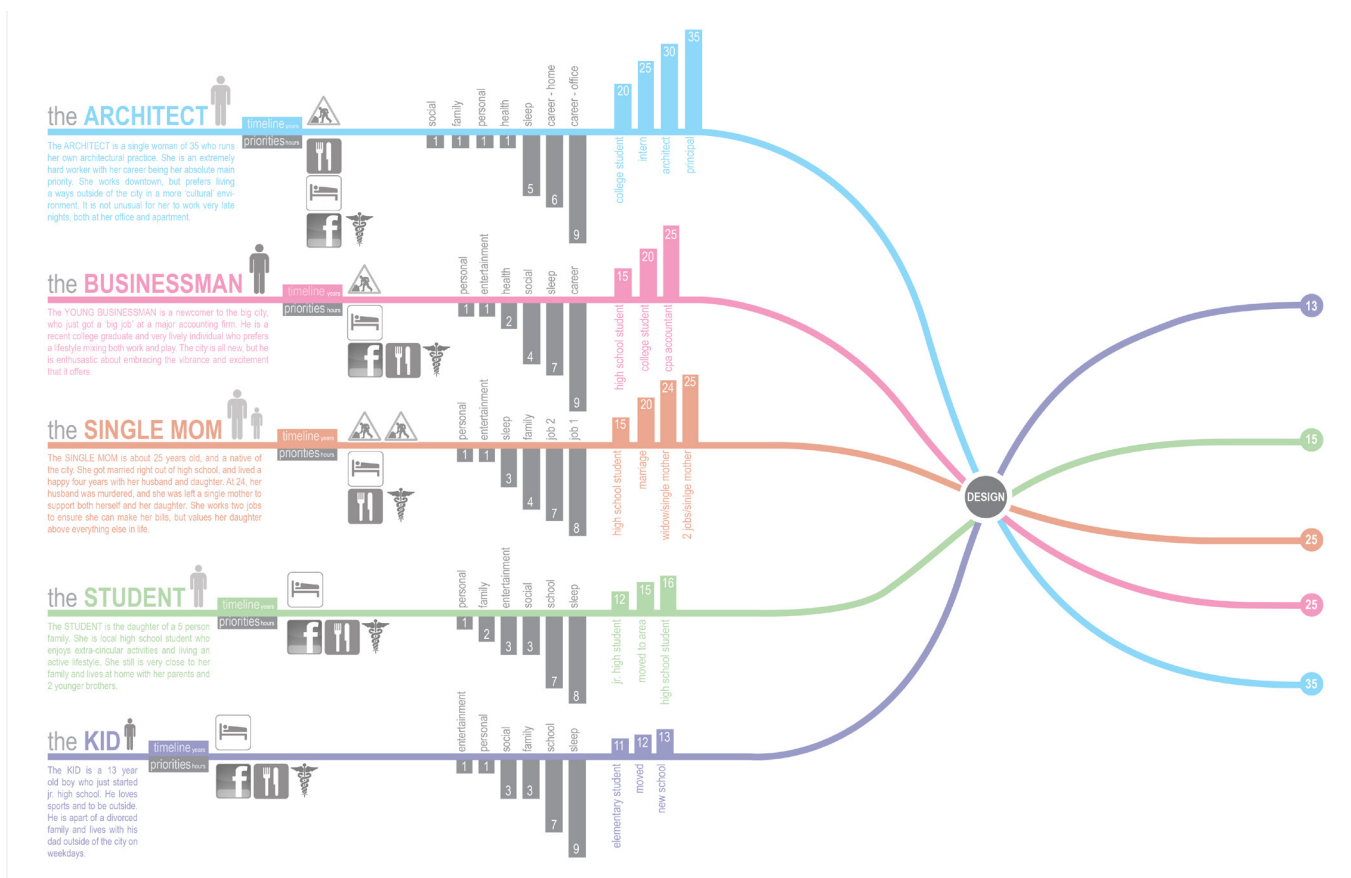


Figure 1. Protagonist Story . Student #1.

and economically. Exercises from the “Story” chapter of Daniel Pink’s book *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* were utilized to support students creating protagonists, or the potential clients and users, for their projects. These exercises include “Write a Mini-Saga”, “Riff on Opening Lines”, “Play Photo Finish”, “Ask Yourself: Who Are These People?”, and “Whip Out the Tape Recorder.”¹⁹ The last three exercises are especially beneficial in getting students to talk about bias, internalized privilege, and getting to know someone instead of assuming things about them. “Whip Out the Tape Recorder” is used to randomly pair up the students to interview one another so that they get to know each other better and use that information to write a short story based on what they learned about their peer’s background.

This last exercise also supports students to their efforts to empathize with their peers as many have a lack of understanding of their classmates’ personal struggles. Low-income students and first-generation students tend to have more difficulty adapting to the rigors of architecture programs, much less transitioning to higher education. Students who must work part time to attend college, and who have limited funding are looked down on, or thought of as less motivated, when they are not able to afford what is an expensive major, and an increasingly more expensive education generally. When this lack of

empathy extends to architecture students who feel that their peers are lesser than them because they do not understand the personal and financial issues that they are dealing with, it creates a hostile studio environment that deters the very diversity architecture programs are trying to foster. Therefore, empathy exercises are not only needed to teach the students to better understand clients and society, but also their peers, and future colleagues.

The protagonist stories are developed as part of the conceptual design for a studio project, and once the protagonists are created they are used by the students to design spaces that accommodate the needs of potential users. Students design presentation boards showing the information about the protagonists they created, and their needs to then design the project for the semester (Figures 1-3). The protagonist stories are also meant to aid with this idea of understanding life, as discussed by Pallasmaa in “Empathetic and Embodied Imagination: Intuiting Experience and Life in Architecture.” Even if the protagonists are imagined, this helps the students to better design architecture with people in mind.²⁰ The ability for students to place themselves in the shoes of their protagonist/client and use “empathetic projection” assists them to empathize with those they are designing for.²¹



Figure 2. Protagonist Story . Student #2.

These service-learning architecture design studios were courses the students choose to take because of the structure of this year-level of studios. It is a topical studio where faculty typically create a studio project that relates to their research and students choose from two topics for this semester-long exploration. This is different than all of the other architecture design studios in our program where the students all work on the same project. These students are actively interested in working with a community partner and are more inclined to be empathetic and interested in the ethical elements of the course. However, students still have othering tendencies and believe that they are “giving” something to a community partner client, not working in an equal, reciprocal relationship. In order to counteract these ideas and teach students about the value and important knowledge of the community partner pre- and post-tests are used to gauge student perceptions at the beginning and end of the course. Reflections are also used to question the students at various points in the semester to challenge their views on the client-architect relationship, which assists them to shed some of their “othering” views of clients. Below are a selection of student responses to reflection questions demonstrating the level to which the students begin to address the ethical impact of working with non-profit community partners and low-income clients.

Student comments praising the service-learning experience:

“I personally believe that service-learning is crucial for the architecture profession. We absolutely must learn from the communities we serve. If we do not, architecture becomes irrelevant. It becomes about create (sic) beautiful artifacts lacking contextual significance. Architecture is about spaces and individual experiences in those places.”

“There is no room for the elitist views of architecture. This I feel allows us to relate architecture back to people.”

“In the review we had this past Monday it was helpful to get input from (redacted). So far we were just speculating things we thought the (redacted) would need, and (redacted) thought they would be utilized well. I think moving forward with the current proposal is a good idea, yet something (redacted) stuck with me. What the children will think and how they will use it? The service-learning project allows us to effectively get feed back (sic) from our client(s) (redacted), as well as the children, be it through asking them directly or through observations, or a Post Occupancy Evaluation. Personally I think this is a great way of going about the project. Even if we were to be able to finish all the proposed work we wouldn’t be able to see the full



Figure 3. Protagonist Story . Student #3.

effect for quite some time. Going back to see how they use the spaces would in the end benefit me as an architect by providing me with valuable information as to how I can improve my designs for the future.”

Student comments challenging ethics of service-learning:

“I do think there is some sort of experimenting that happens, but is that a bad thing?”

“I also think that the ‘clients’ are/should be expecting something a little different from a regular home. It is FREE. You can not (sic) argue with that.”

“They are getting something that they want virtually for free. No one can argue about getting something for free. A client getting something for free is more open to ideas as opposed to a client who is paying.”

The combination of reflections and reciprocity make these topical service-learning design studio courses true service-learning experiences and benefit all parties in their execution.

The Memorial Studio

In an effort to explore ethics and empathy in a different way, and inspired by the current global pandemic, the author created a topical architecture design studio that did not work with a real community partner client in a service-learning structure, but instead used a hypothetical project to give students agency in a different way. The Memorial Studio was initially meant to be a studio project that designed a COVID-19 Memorial using the personal experiences of the students to allow them to empathize with those who were directly impacted by the global pandemic and memorialize those who died. The students were very upset about designing a memorial to a pandemic that was negatively impacting their lives and was not yet over. The thought being that time and perspective was needed to provide a competent and empathetic response. Instead, the studio worked as a group, led by the students, and determined that the studio would remain one about designing a memorial, but each student would propose a topic that they felt needed to be memorialized. This conversation with the students improved the author’s ability to empathize with them and how they felt which then led to a studio where the students were more engaged and found agency because they were part of the process in determining the project.

The studio of twenty 4th year students researched twenty different topics from Juneteenth to Women's Rights. Each student presented their ideas to their peers and the studio narrowed down to eleven final topics. The final topics for the memorials were 1) AIDS, 2) Stonewall Riots, 3) Sexual Assault, 4) Witch Trials, 5) Opioid Epidemic, 6) Disability Rights Memorial, 7) Trail of Tears, 8) Indigenous Schools, 9) Border Crossing, 10) Japanese Internment, and 11) Slave Cemeteries.

While the students were developing project proposals and continuing into the project development, they were also being asked to complete certain "empathy and ethics" exercises. First, the students were asked to take two of the implicit bias tests from Project Implicit at Harvard University (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>). The two tests they were required to take were on race and sexual identity. Some of the students took additional tests on gender and religion. The idea was to start a conversation about bias and how it can impact our ability to empathize with others. The class had a discussion on the experience and what they learned about implicit bias, and each student had to complete a reflection question asking what they learned about implicit bias and how it would impact their design process that semester. Student responses in the reflections ranged from surprise to what the implicit bias tests showed, to no surprise, to thinking they could game the system now that they know how the tests work.

Additional exercises to facilitate the students' thinking about, and building, their empathy towards others included 1) performing three acts of kindness a week, 2) participating in empathetic events such as working in a local casserole kitchen, 3) and having a "date" with various classmates they did not know well or did not typically spend time with. This particular exercise was similar to the "Whip Out the Tape Recorder" exercise used in the Service-Learning studio that allowed the classmates to get to know someone they did not regularly socialize with. All of these exercises were also linked to the reflections and the students were asked questions about how the empathy exercises made them feel, how they thought they made others feel, and what they learned from the exercises.

The studio also went on a field trip to the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial to Peace and Justice in Montgomery, AL as an example of what their project could be like. This resulted in another reflection question, as well as a reflection question about their research into their initial topics for the memorial.

All of these reflections and exercises in empathy and ethics were framed with a pre-test and a post-test that gauged student perceptions on empathy and ethics in architecture education at the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester. These tests also collected demographic information on the students to determine if any patterns were present based on gender, race, hometown, and religion.

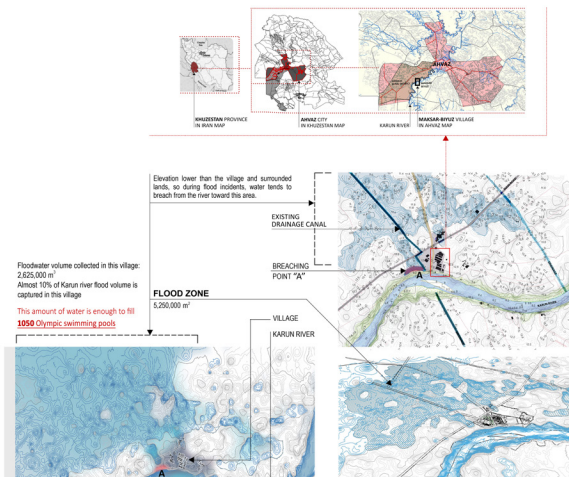


Figure 4. Bonding with the clients' children. Photograph by author.



Figure 5. Playing basketball with the client. Photograph by author.

Summary

Both of the topical studio types, from the service-learning to the memorial studio, were meant not only to build ethical skills and empathy, but to give the students agency in their education. From selecting the topical studio that they work in to structuring the studio to be student-led, the students were encouraged to take the lead on their education and to challenge the traditional method of architecture design studio structure. This is to counteract the disenfranchisement you see in students when they feel the studio projects they are required to work on do not reflect their life and experiences. The students in these studios have commented that this was the first time they felt engaged because the project, especially the memorial, was something they felt connected to instead of it being an abstract idea that they could not empathize with.

CONCLUSIONS

Results from conducting these various studios using ethics and empathy garnered a variety of information. First, working with a community partner allows students to see the impact of their work on others, especially the underserved communities that the community partners tend to serve. This was also true with encouraging students to lead the studio in selecting the topic of the memorial they designed. Giving students agency through engaging social issues and asking the students what they are interested in increased their interest and commitment to these studios.

Asking students to think about their own biases and backgrounds also aided in engaging the students in ways they had not been engaged before. The implicit bias tests began to open the students' minds about their own biases and how it can impact their abilities as architects to empathize with others. Additionally, the studio "dates" benefitted the students by learning more about each other and overcoming stereotypes and preconceived notions about one another. Both of these exercises framed the expectations of the students in how they should begin to think about clients for their projects by being more open-minded and trying to set their preconceived notions to the side.

In addition to the students trying to set aside preconceived notions the empathy events and exercises helped students to put themselves in the shoes of the "other" to better understand the needs of their clients and the people who will experience their architectural designs. Moreover, non-traditional approaches to architecture design studio such as letting students lead decision making processes and selecting their own project topic better engaged the students and empowered them in their own education.

While not all of the students developed empathy and an understanding of the ethics related to working with a real client, most of them came out of the courses with a more developed sense of ethics and empathy and the level of their privilege, or lack thereof. Many wanted to continue working with community partners as both students and future professionals. Typically, the students bonded with their clients and developed a strong sense of agency and ownership over the project that influenced their future development (Figures 4, and 5).

These experiences do not just impact the students emotionally, but also academically. Research into service-learning and social justice show that students who participate in classes that include these elements are more academically engaged and successful in their studies.²² Additionally, as Brown and Moreau Yates noted in "Seeing the World through Another Person's Eyes", the othering of non-architects begins during architecture education, and it is there where learning about empathy and ethics in architecture should begin.

ENDNOTES

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