Transverse Landscapes of Learning

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We live in an age of transverse epistemologies. From essays to TED talks, dictionaries to Wikipedia, hand sketches to Instagram, architecture operates in increasingly wide currencies that posit the field with its agency. As much as learning happens in the traditional classroom, mass consumption and reliance on open-access and open-source platforms continuously shift conditions of learning. Contemporary means of information production, dispersal, and regeneration continue to expand, catalyzing inquiries into the medium of the message and the shifted manner of conversation in lieu of new provocative platforms that value collective intelligence.

Diplomatic negotiations across different media as well as critical curation of one's own sphere of learning is vital in order to provoke new landscapes of inspiration. Raising criticality in how ideas are formed and executed through conditions, rather than transmitting what to study through inherited disciplines of knowledge, has situated itself at the forefront of our mission as educators, in turn to question – how can learning effectively happen for the rising architect? How do we build upon existing frames of pedagogy in lieu of a wide expanse of readily available sources to nurture learning across different sectors of the architectural discipline?

Anyone who has gone through architecture training is familiar with the modes of critique and feedback. Constructive critique - through desk-crits, pin-ups, and reviews - have become our most fundamental mode of learning and teaching in Architecture. Yet we are also familiar with a culture of hierarchy, where critique is only given by a select few critics and faculty. If we turn to explore the discursive modes of architectural pedagogy, and if architecture, in both scholarly knowledge and professional skills of an architect, is shaped and conditioned by a specific set of discourses, the role and effects of these discursive modes of learning demand to be studied.

My use of the term 'discursive' is related to the concept elaborated by Michel Foucault in Archaeology of Knowledge, in which he describes the notion of the episteme as "some thing like a world-view, a slice of history common to all branches of knowledge, which imposes on each one the same norms and postulates, a general stage of reason, a certain structure of thought that the men of a particular period cannot escape."[1] It is important to note the significance of the 'world-view' or the 'slice' mentioned by Foucault, as something not held within epistemological categorizations or disciplines, but a common perspective encoded in all structures of knowledge. This view, slice, or perspective is a mechanism that enables inquiry, thought-making, provocations, and positions. Before framing knowledge into disciplines, it is important to note the common functions that lie across objects, methods, and propositions in spectrums of epistemological formation.

This paper attempts neither to identify common views held across epistemological spans, nor to locate gaps between different structures of knowledge. It constitutes some first steps towards understanding one mode of knowledge-making - discursive formation, in particular oral discussion as a mode of learning, to be studied in its continuous transformation. I seek to recognize the roles and effects of these oral modes of discursive formation across academic institutions in Architecture today.

In doing so, questions are framed on: 1) the role of learning and discourse in architecture, 2) the role and significance of discursive modes of learning in constantly shifting social and academic cultures, and 3) the role of the educator in enabling such methods of discursive exchange.

These oral discursive initiatives go beyond all familiar formats of the traditional review, symposia, or roundtable in the Architecture school, to discover efforts that expand upon synthetic methods of knowledge exchange driven by a current sample of Architecture schools in the United States. The selected pedagogical initiatives share common traits that: 1) share the work and practice encompassing each school, 2) through a conversational platform that invites a rotating number of speakers to tackle a range of relevant topics across a series of installments, and 3) with multiple educational communities, particularly an engaged and active student body that frames, forms, or drives the discussion.

Rather than going through individual cases and analyzing by procedure of case-by-case examination, this paper looks into situations across examined initiatives that reflect upon those situations through frames of 1) premise, 2) negotiation, and 3) risk. As two sides of a polemic effectively questions and challenges ideas held by each other, these discursive tactics and effects present frameworks to understand shifting courses of discursive formation across cases. Furthermore, these discursive frameworks can be understood as prototypes, transferable to other schools and faculty according to prospective needs and functions.

Figure 1: Darlings in *The Living room* with Clark Thenhaus & Sasa Zivkovic. Nov, 2017. *The Living Room*, Cornell AAP Webpage

PREMISE

Tracing the history of critique in the setting of Architecture schools in America, a course of study based on the ideals and frames of academism of the French L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts was adopted in the late 19th century. With the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) first instituting a Beaux-Arts curriculum in America in 1893, an inseparable link was formed across Architecture schools across America that followed to adopt similar curricular agenda, methods, and tools that instituted the Beaux-Arts method of study. This included the integration of the closed-jury system. Oftentimes, these juries took form after a session of charrettes and concurs, or competitions. The word charrette in French stands for "cart" or "chariot", which was used at the Ecole to wheel off drawings, models, and materials after students had intensely designed a competition project, which was then juried behind closed doors. The devised 'jury' or 'review' consisted of a panel of experts who would make collective assessment on the quality of a student's work based on verbal presentation of the atelier master, as opposed to the student himself. With little feedback or discussion given towards the criteria and evaluation of assessment, a closed jury imposed a culture of hierarchical learning with much power constructed in the hands of the jury to anonymously pass, fail, or expel a student based on the submitted work. [2]

This culture carried over to the American schools in Architecture. It was only in the postwar period when the gradual evolution from closed to open juries invited students to sit in on critiques and be invited to listen on the feedback. This tradition continues to this day, where a final review often consists of a set of jury at the front, students in the back, with a sole presenter responding to the critics. After a furious few days of completing project production, the rest of the students often prepare en charrette for their own reviews, dose off, or simply listen to the critique that take place among the critics and faculty. While not entirely "closed-off", an asymmetrical dichotomy applicably exists in most Architecture schools, particularly visible during reviews when the critic's statements, propositions, and postulations are made evident to the student in presentation.

It is under this premise - the traditional system of a closed jury and ensuing culture that still abides to its genealogical ties – that we start to explore some deviations that test and challenge the closed systems of discursive exchange. These 'open' frameworks commonly seek to expand demarcated boundaries. They are not immune to territorial tension, formal canons, or established statements, oftentimes in negotiation with held propositions that have structured disciplinary knowledge. Yet, dialectical to the formation of its episteme, the openness of these discursive frameworks allow to recognize, question, and re-understand concepts framed by the discipline.

NEGOTIATION

The Master in Design Studies (MDes) program at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) was created to bolster and expand upon arising provocations and spectrums of study from the disciplines of Architecture, Landscape, and Urban Design. Offered in eight different categories –Art, Design, and the Public Domain, Critical Conservation, Energy and Environment, Real Estate and the Built Environment, Risk and Resilience, Technology, History and Philosophy of Design, Urbanism, Landscape, and Ecology – the MDes program offers diverse spectrums of study steeped "to understand and influence the underlying processes shaping contemporary life."[3]

The program's hallmark thesis, or "Open Project," was termed starting the fall semester of 2016 to provide a open platform for developing a thesis project to "cut across and unify the various specializations within the MDes structure, across methodology; conceptual development; archives; the role of precedent; knowledge and media techniques; and models of dissemination." The Open Project provides structure to interact across transverse spectrums of disciplines for those in the MDes program at Harvard GSD.

The very word 'interdisciplinary' or 'transdisciplinary' operates on a system that categorizes a distinct set of individual disciplines and a relative combination or mix of disciplinary boundaries that live between or across, such that the very word, 'transdisciplinary' "require[s] a liminal, 'neither/nor' mindset". [4] However, if we recognize the importance of the transverse, as a framework of learning that does not disregard the discipline, yet attempts to go beyond subsets or scales of knowledge frames, then it is possible to understand how these transverse landscapes of knowledge hold adaptation and flexibility at its center in order to negotiate between, across, or beyond territories of knowledge.

The various types and wide ranges of theses that emerge from the Open projects, provide provocations that not only tie in different categories of research relevant to the MDes program, but also posit new frames of thought that go beyond established MDes frameworks of inquiry. Different modes and methods of carrying out a research agenda is consulted and executed, shifted and molded according to one's own research topic. In this process of adaptive transfer and exchange, the ability to maneuver through established premises and negotiate new terrains for inquiry is essential.

The critics for the Open Project reviews are also brought in across arrays of diverse professional and academic sectors. While the review system still inherits the culture of a single student presenter who stands to defend the project, the discussion that emerges from the Open Project reviews presents wider lenses for thought – as a single project is looked through the lens of critics whose research and practice

Figure 2: Instagram feed of Platforms 10, *LiveFeed*. Nov, 2017. Harvard GSD Instagram.

interests match the students'; for example a practicing landscape architect, an architectural historian, or an artist.

The culture of the Open Projects reflects on to the school's journal, Platform, in which its 10th edition, presented a fluidly assembled series of GSD student work. Entitled "Live Feed", this edition is designed upon the notion of shifting conditions of knowledge, as images are loosely laid out, with one image oftentimes spilling onto the next page. A fluid continuum of ideas and materials present a sense of openness, interconnectivity, and flexibility, values upon which the Open Project also takes its educational frame.

Going beyond academic programs, open frameworks for transverse dialogue and discussion continue to emerge across Architecture schools today.

Driven by a body of students in the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning, at Cornell University, The Living Room intends "to prompt critical discussion about architecture today." Initiated in the fall semester of 2017, The Living Room takes its name to "envision discussion happening in informal settings, similar to ones which take place in living rooms". [5] The students bring in rugs, sofas, and living room-like furniture to create a setting in the L.P. Kwee Studio wood floor. Students, invited guests, and a faculty member of the Cornell

community debate in counter perspectives around a particular topic. With an agenda to reveal dialectical perspectives on scholarship and research, the group has featured a number of topics from digital design, the institution's place in political activism, to the place of expression in architecture today.

Similarly, Dinner with the in-Laws, organized by the Architecture Student Council at the MIT School of Architecture. An internal debate series "among family on the disciplinary topics that shape the practice and research of [MIT]," the Dinner indeed reminds the challenging, sometimes uncomfortable setting of a dinner with an in-law, in this case a faculty and guest who debate with students on prevalent topics, some of which have addressed notions of: agency, traumatic memorial, displacement, and territory. [6]

Similar to the GSD's Live Feed, MIT's 46th edition of its academic journal Thresholds also assembles "an array of scattered content, welcoming innovative approaches and projects..." [7] Entitled "Scatter," the journal gathers non-architectural materials and diverse forms of media - from posters and postcards, to webpages and virtual spaces – to capture the current readership that access materials from an array of sources. It is no surprise to see Scatter published at the same time that Dinner with the in-Laws ran a series on the notion of "Displacement" and "Territory", which shed light on the

Figure 3: Mark Wigley & Hernan Diaz Alonso at *SpinRoom*. Sept, 2018. Sci-Arc Webpage.

arising open-source and open-access culture and its relation-ship to displaced contexts and renewed notions of territory.

Both the Living Room and Dinner with the in-Laws seek to hold connotative settings of a casual, informal living room or dinner table. It is upon this informality, or suggested comfort, that the conversations take place, where different opinions, thoughts, and deliberations coalesce. The implied sense of openness and understanding is essential in order for stu-dents, faculty, and invited guests to openly make questions, postulations, and statements. The students in both the Living room and the Dinner, which are driven by an active student government body with support from the Universities, are particularly active participants who coordinate to run the series. These are settings for students to test out their thesis or dissertation ideas as well.

RISK

An interplay between speaker and respondent, these plat-forms for discussion frame conditions for criticality. Michael Speaks' notion of 'design intelligence' recognizes the impor-tance of "opportunism and risk-taking rather than problem solving" which warrants a synthetic form of learning that is serviced by the active, the empowered, and the self-guiding. [8] Criticality becomes a breeder for synthetic forms

of discussion, where the speaker sets the playground for negotiation and tests out provocations and statements, is essential to empower self-advocated learning.

Both the Living Room and Dinner with the in-Laws are differ-ent from Sci-Arc's Spin Room or Columbia University's GSAPP Conversations, which are both hosted and managed by the respective institutions. Not surprisingly, the Spin Room and the Conversations record and release the talks from the ses-sions, re-fined and edited before being posted onto iTunes, YouTube, and SoundCloud.

These conversations are shared with the public community, presenting opportunities to involve the larger extended community by situating the institution at the forefront of spearheading provocative thoughts and inquiries into the public realm. These conversations, though refined, neverthe-less reveal possibilities to seamlessly position the institution beyond the physical walls of the classroom, expanding the learning ground to the everyday internet user. While holding exposure to unpredictability, chance, and alternatives as the audience is oftentimes unknown, these platforms are cre-ated with intent to serve as a connector, dynamically bridging existing bodies of academic discourse and public talk.

FINDINGS - A RESILIENT MODE OF LEARNING

The findings gathered from studying the initiatives recognize pedagogical opportunities that reveal constructive conversation as a resilient mode of learning. Synthetic continuities and connections engage in scholarship and knowledge-finding across disciplines beyond the classroom. Moreover, an expanded platform invites larger groups of bodies, extending from faculty, students, and staff, to alumni, professionals, and local communities. However, in this process, the terrain for discussion as well as methods and modes of inquiry are negotiated, oftentimes pushing and pulling ideas, thoughts, and provocations.

Like in the Conversations and Spin Room, an extended audience not only provides potential to include underrepresented groups and issues, but also reveals oftentimes unrecognized contexts that can test existing, and reveal new perspectives towards a subject matter. As force multipliers of knowledge dissemination, these casual yet effective settings present opportunities to acknowledge and emphasize the significance of topics discussed at hand. Empowering both discussants as well as the topics discussed, these conversations enable resilient forms of learning.

While inviting a diverse audience of different levels and areas of study embraces notions of openness and inclusion, the underlying premise that these discussions are initiated from, at least enabled through, an educational institution should be taken into consideration when opening up doors to invite an influx and array of stances. The churning of views and slices into the episteme allow for negotiative processes through adaptive modes of verbal exchange.

ENDNOTES

1. Michel Foucault, Archeology of Knowledge (New York: Pantheon, 1971).

2. Kathryn H. Anthony, Design Juries on Trial: the Renaissance of the Design Studio. ed. Van Nostrand Reinhold (New York, 1991).

3. "MDes Open Projects", Harvard Graduate School of Design, https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/course/mdes-open-project-1-fall-2016/

4. Rolf Hughes, "The Art of Displacement: Designing Experiential Systems and Transverse Epistemologies as Conceptual Criticism", Agency in Architecture. FootPrint, no. 4 (2009), 49-63.

5. "The Living Room", Cornell AAP, https://aap.cornell.edu/news-events/living-room-work-fall-2017

6. "Dinner with the in-Laws", MIT, https://architecture.mit.edu/architecture-and-urbanism/lecture/dinner-laws

7. "Thresholds 46: Scatter! Call for Submissions", MIT, https://architecture.mit.edu/news/thresholds-46-scatter-call-submissions

8. Michael Speaks, "Design Intelligence and the New Economy", Architectural Record 190 no. 1 (2002), 72-74.