

The Practicing Academic Insights of South African Architectural Education

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ABSTRACT

Architectural education, in the past had a grounding in a strict apprentice or pupillage method of training architects. The apprentice was someone who worked or trained under a master that transferred skill through a “hands on” approach. Architecture was regarded as one of the arts and there was no formal training to qualify one as an architect. It was through the acclaimed Vitruvius that the architectural profession was born. Vitruvius had published “Ten Books on Architecture” that led to an attempt to summarize professional knowledge of architecture and in doing so became the first recognizable architect. The architectural profession spread throughout Europe in the mid-16th century and the builder and architect became two distinct characters. Although architecture had become a profession, it wasn’t up until the late 17th century that architecture became an academic pursuit through an institutionalized educational system known as École des Beaux Arts, however the pursuit of a strict academic scholar was not the focus. At the beginning of the 1800’s, The University of Berlin in Germany forged the fundamental research and scholarly pursuit. Architecture, like the professions of medicine, law etc. became a system of academic pursuit where professors concentrated deeply on academics first and professional work second. It is through the lens of history we can decipher how architecture became an academic discipline almost de-voiding it of its vocational nature. In its current standing, various universities place a high emphasis on research output from their academic staff. Presently, architecture schools in South Africa recruit lecturers on their academic profiles, rather than their vocational experience. The approach of which has devalued the input of industry into education. It has been noted that there has been an increase in an academic pursuit rather than a professional one for the lecturers that teach architecture. This research explores the views of academics on architectural education, teaching methods and the importance of practice at South African universities. The authors of this research provide an auto-ethnographic insight into their invaluable experience of being academics at two large Universities in South Africa and concurrently run successful practices. The research makes use of a mixed method approach of secondary data from literature and semi-structured interviews posed to academics. Initial findings reveal that academics are pushing the industry to play a part in the education of architects; however, the extent must be determined. If industry plays a role in the education of architects, what factors are considered and how does this intertwine with the academic nature of training? What strategies are academics employing to make sure students are vocationally well trained and academically capable? Another important question to ask is what qualities make an academic architect in the 21st century?

INTRODUCTION

Architecture, like the professions of Medicine, Engineering, Nursing etc. requires highly skilled individuals to perform the various duties expected from the occupation. On a daily basis, the professional is required to utilise these skills in a highly practical manner and engage with the subject matter. It can be argued that this innate ability needs to be implanted very early on in the education to sculpt the character

of the individual. However, for a long time the profession of architecture has focused on the academic nurturing of students and not a practical one. Evidence suggests that the disconnection between practice and society occurred during the 17th century, upon the academisation of architecture as a discipline. Cret traces the disconnection of art (and architecture) from society, to the Renaissance, which separated art from craft.¹ The consequence of Renaissance ideologies was that architectural practice developed as a discipline-focused profession, following the ideals of the court and the aristocracy. The close relation of architectural practice to construction via the practice of the master-builder was lost. The perpetuation of disconnected teaching practice was perhaps no more evident than in the intellectually disconnected silos of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in France. The principles of the Beaux-Arts continue to define the general approach to architectural education at South African schools of architecture – the disciplinary confined studio and the design jury underpin the current status quo. The architectural profession has come under increasing criticism, especially in the context of South Africa as a developing nation, for not adequately responding to the socio-economic needs of a rapidly transforming society; architectural education has a critical role to play in this regard. Architectural education, not dissimilar to any professional education, aims to develop knowledge, skills and values that develop a professional holistically. The reality, however, is that professional education and training often finds a disconnection with broader society, or struggles to adapt to rapid change in contexts. What role could professional practice experience play in this regard? This research asserts that the prevalent modes of architectural education and research are heavily confined within the silos of academia – a critical disconnection with practice and, ultimately, society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, various sources of literature are reviewed to form a theoretical framework which opens the argument of Academization of Architecture, Modes of Learning and reference to other professions and how they are handling the balance between practice and academia.

The Academization of Architecture

According to Cret The academization of architecture can be traced back to the Ecole des Beaux Arts.¹ A critique of this approach, however, requires an informed understanding of the curriculum and pedagogic approaches that broadly shaped higher education. Schubert elaborated on the concept of the hidden curriculum whereby the social relationships between participants in learning, students, teachers and members of society alike, construct and refine the character of students.² He defines four perspectives on curriculum aligned to character types – social behaviourist, intellectual traditionalist, experientialist and critical reconstructionist.

The historical evolution of architectural education since the mid-17th century reveals a strong correlation with social behaviorism and intellectual traditionalism. The social behaviorist perspective relates to the pedagogic mode of pupillage / apprenticeship training whereby

the student would consume, observe and mimic the knowledge and skills of the master, typically a successful architect.² This perspective also translated in the pedagogic approaches of the Beaux-Arts which epitomized the architectural studio as a creative silo, disconnected from society.¹ External images of social success and the behavioral observation thereof would form the basis of learning. Intellectual traditionalism on the other hand, while not specific to behavioral observation, relied heavily on the great intellectual works located within the logic of disciplines; exposed the learner to ideas that would transcend historic eras, geographic locality, culture, race, gender, and class among others.² These two perspectives would shape the evolution of education over centuries and clearly defined the most dominant discourses and approaches of architectural education in South Africa today.

The Experientialist approach poses a major and vitally valid challenge to the two preceding approaches, highlighting the importance of the broader learning context by bringing into play, professional experience, life experience and informal learning.² The approach includes diversity and multiculturalism by placing high value on contextually situated problems, practice and shared experiences. Educational philosopher, John Dewey, promulgated an engaged learning paradigm which placed high value on real life experiences, criticizing schooling for being exaggerated rather than supplementary to the ordinary course of living.³ Dewey, in 1938 further asserted that democratic forms of social life improve access and participation, thereby improving the quality of human experience.⁴

Modes of Learning

Gibbons et al. present two modes of knowledge production – mode 1 and mode 2 – widely referenced in higher education.⁴ The discipline-specific mode 1 type of knowledge hinges around scientific methodology, norms and judgement of what constitutes sound practice – controlled within institutions of learning and research. Mode 2, on the other hand, accommodates trans-disciplinary practice, heterogeneity and transience; it is not bound within institutions, thereby bringing a wider range of participants into the process of inquiry; practitioners are vital to this mode of critical pedagogic practice.⁴ Mode 2 is rooted in context and interdisciplinary practice. In this paradigm of practice-based teaching and learning, knowledge and knowledge production may be considered dialogical; knowledge and inquiry become democratic processes of engagement with society by way of practice.

Professional practice, therefore, cannot be regarded as a product of a linear approach via schooling followed by practice. Rather, professional practice itself empowers teachers to expose their students to real life problems while it becomes the genesis for research focus and output. In this paradigm, practice bridges the gap between theory and society. Professional practice may also benefit from engagement with the academic environment, whereby the critical discourses within the academic environment and tested in practice. Critical scholarship thereby advances through critical practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Due to the nature of this research, the authors found it imperative to use an Interpretivist Paradigm to inform the methodological approach and to analyze the data collected. This research aims to examine the various techniques academics employ in the faculty of architecture to introduce an engagement between practice and academia. The following methods were used to determine the various strategies put into place:

Task 1: Review of Literature

In this task, the authors conduct a brief review of literature to investigate the various theories, models and strategies employed to successfully blend practice and academia in the profession.

Task 2: Research Design

The study took a mixed method approach utilizing primary and secondary data. Initially a brief literature review was conducted to understand the various methods of a blended academic-practical approach. The literature also delved into various theories to further investigate the methods of teaching courses using real-world examples. The primary method of investigation for this research involved qualitative, semi-structure interviews and auto-ethnographic enquiry. The study consisted of 9 interviewees, which are or have been involved in academia and practice concurrently to understand the methods, values and traits involved in being an academic practitioner. The research is further reinforced by an auto-ethnographic enquiry of the two authors, from which their personal experiences seek to further clarify the research question.

Task 3: Analysis of Data

The analysis of data for this research is by far the most important aspect of this paper. The data was collected by interviewing academics who are also concurrently practitioners, this included the authors of this research. Various questions were posed to the interviewees and this data was interpreted through the lens of the theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, the data proved useful to understand the traits, methodology and frameworks adopted to successfully teach in academia using new knowledge gained from practice.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on the personal experience of the authors as professionally practicing academics, followed by a discussion on the experiences of other professionally practicing academics / researchers. The challenges and approaches to successful practice while teaching will reveal that practice, research and teaching are not mutually exclusive, rather mutually supportive. The authors of this research used a qualitative interview process with practicing academics to examine the methods, traits and frameworks employed to successfully balance a life of academia practice.

Demographic of Interviewees

(With inclusion of Auto Ethnographic enquiry):

Lecturer	Senior Lecturer	Professor	Total
5 + 1	1 + 1	3	11

For this research, it was critically important to interview academics from different ranges in terms of seniority. This assisted in a deeper understanding of how level of experience affected their commitment or understanding of balance both in their own practice and teaching methods. From a total of 11 interviewees, including the authors, 6 are Lecturers, 2 are Senior Lecturers and 3 are Professors. In the following narrative, the authors probed various areas for a deeper understanding:

Does your University allow you to engage in professional practice?

"Condition of being a practitioner and was accepted by the University, before accepting the position. Also had a record of being a good practitioner which made it easier to convince the University of such."

"Reluctantly so (of late, not at all) for the very reasons that you have outlined in the accompanying summary, attributed entirely to the fact that tertiary education is globally considered research – not vocationally – oriented. This inevitably causes a huge conflict between "vocational" academics and university management, and will remain so in the foreseeable future. Universities, as you would know, measure their effectiveness / success in terms of research – and not creative – output, for which they are financially rewarded."

"Originally one had to spend twenty-two hours a week at the University, declare the practice to the Dean and contribute books to the Library."

From the experiences of the interviewees, we see a clear response on how the university "allows" faculty to engage with practice. The response from interviewees has been marked by the unquestionable "Yes" they do allow faculty to practice, however, under some rules. Briefly, the universities work comes first, undoubtedly being permanently employed by them requires dedication to their main cause first and foremost. However, universities in South Africa often don't follow this through holistically and rules differ from institution to institution. The authors both enjoy the fact of being able to practice for 8hrs/week and additionally afterhours and weekends. Although it is not the best circumstances, the fact of being able to practice greatly enhances the values of the practicing academic. Universities are however focusing much attention to research and all levels of teachers associated to universities must publish research annually which is part of their job profile. Various practicing academics complain that this is a burden, however the value extracted from being able to produce research also greatly enhances one's ability to think critically and offers students more than just practical experience.

Describe how you balance academic and practice Work?

"You will have to work very hard, be quick on your feet. But still believe that it is important to practice."

"With difficulty. I was not able to practice when I headed the two mentioned architecture schools; the work load simply did not allow it. I was certainly able to practice – albeit selectively – when I was merely a lecturer and held little administrative responsibility."

"Like holding a burning candle with Practice and Academia at either ends and your soft hand in the centre."

From the above commentary, it is clear that balancing the loads of academia and practice comes with great difficulty, but it is not impossible. The authors do concur with the views of the interviewees, however employ different strategies to making the both mutually beneficial. One such strategy that works for the authors is being part of established practice which we are both directors. This strategy allows us to concentrate on parts of projects rather than taking on the entirety of it single handed. Furthermore, both authors have full time employed staff which responsibilities are allocated. This approach by far allows us to fill in both pairs of shoes on a daily basis. From the various interviewees, it is clear that practicing and being an academic is difficult but are mutually beneficial.

Describe your experiences as a practitioner teaching at architecture schools?

"The experience from a design point of view is stimulating. You are constantly exposed to design and solving problems which benefits both the student and the work that I do out of university. I am able to use practical knowledge gained from private practice to assist students in the most practical and efficient solutions."

"The discipline of architecture is intrinsically vocationally oriented – and as it should be – with design at its core. I believe it is imperative to be able to design, and design well, in order to be a truly effective design tutor – to say, if design is one's primary interest."

"Always very stimulating from all aspects. Being able to impart knowledge to hungry minds and being inspired by young minds in turn."

From the above responses, the authors concurred with the responses from interviewees and discovered that a certain stimulation came from the design studio that inspired them, even in practice. Furthermore, the respondents cemented the fact of being in practice further enhanced their ability to teach in a design studio and impart practical knowledge. The authors self-introspection revealed similar results and we believe that our experiences in the design studio have further enhanced our problem-solving skills in design. From the investigation, it can be understood that the design studio triggers various responses to practicing academics; it inspires, uplifts critical thinking and enhances problem solving abilities to mention a few. These are critical statements as upon initial introspection we assumed that the value only lies with the teacher, however the studio becomes a teacher and grows the mind of the human teacher. If this is the case, teaching at a university can further enhance the skills of the practitioner as it becomes a symbiotic relationship, feeding each other.

Describe the value of your practice knowledge/ skills to your students?

"I am able to give real world solutions to my students which equips them to design practical solutions. This is valuable when they leave and take positions in private practices as it lessens the gap between university and the working world. Students enjoy a teacher who can engage with practice and show them the real-world practical example. Good for the teacher and the students."

"What's the saying, those who can't, teach! The majority of students of architecture want to be practitioners and not academics (and universities should be cognisant of that) hence practicing architects would inevitably be held in higher esteem than those who have never built a building."

"A connection to the real world and all its challenges and opportunities."

From the respondents, a clear identification of the real-world output becomes apparent. All the respondents that participated in this study have made it clear that practical expertise from the teacher is of utmost importance in the design studio. The value of a practicing academic goes far beyond the teaching of design, it prepares the students for challenges of the real world by virtue of situations that the teacher has experienced prior. Furthermore, the engagement between student and teacher on practical problems in the real world opens up the discussion beyond that of a set syllabus. It is also of great importance that universities relate to the real world and open up the curriculum to delve into the depths of practice and not solely focus on academic expertise. Critically analysing one respondents' view on this matter; "The majority of students of architecture want to be practitioners and not academics." Should resonate highly with the university. This statement, point blank describes the situation of the world today in terms of graduating students. The authors concur with the respondents in all terms, we further add that deep learning occurs when students relate to the real-world examples.

CONCLUSION

This research sought to discover how Academics that are full-time employed by the university involve themselves in private practice and the benefits it offers to the students they teach. Some interesting observations have been captured from the 9 interviewees and the 2 auto-ethnographic enquiries. It was interesting to learn how different universities allow their academics to be involved in practice and how this has changed over the years. Although universities allow their academics to practice, it is always in constrained terms, nevertheless it is better than not practicing at all. We also learned that the requirements for lecturers in recent times is more academically focused rather practice related experience. This issue is troubling as mentioned by one of the interviewees, that more than 90% of students want to practice in the field and not become academics. This leaves 0% to 10% pool of candidates that will become academics. Generally, this pool will have relatively little to no experience in the field. The authors also sought to understand how academics balance their time between practice and academia, it came as no surprise that all candidates including the authors found this a difficult task. Although 90% of the respondents did concur that practice while teaching was greatly beneficial to the students and to keep knowledge relevant in the studio. It was to our benefit that we learned, or later realized that the design studio becomes a teacher to the academic. Involvement in a studio environment keeps the academic on their toes, pushing for faster and more creative problem-solving skills. Although initially, we were swayed by the fact that practice assists us in keeping our knowledge relevant for our students, the studio environment due to its nature became the 3rd teacher and further inspired us in our own practice work. Finally, all respondents concurred that due to their involvement in practice their skills were kept relevant and their students had a better understanding of the work in reality. For this research, the last question was truly beneficial as it opened up the

debate for further probing into this area of research. Although this research, was short and simple, it probed various areas that were under-researched in the South African Architectural education setting and possibly in a world setting. The authors recommend that this research be taken forward on a global scale to further understand the research question.

Notes

1. Paul P Cret, 1941, The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts and Architectural Education, The Journal of the American Society of Architectural Historians.
2. William Henry Schubert, 1986, Curriculum: Perspective, Paradigm and Possibility, 1st ed, New York: Macmillan Pub. Co.
3. John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, 1915, Schools of To-Morrow, 1st ed, New York: E. P. Dutton & Company.
4. John Dewey, 1938, Experience and Education, 1st ed, New York: Macmillan Pub. Co.
5. Michael Gibbons, Camille Limoges, Helga Nowotny, Simon Schwartzman, Peter Scott and Martin Trow, 1994, The New Production of Knowledge, Edited by Michael Gibbons, Social Studies Of Science, 1st ed, London: SAGE Publications Ltd

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