

Architecture Climate Change & Society

Buell Center
2021 Course Development Prize

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE 3: FUTURE PRACTICE

Megan Groth

Woodbury University

The direct relationship of the global climate crisis to the built environment—the realm of the architect—means that architects are uniquely positioned to respond to the climate emergency in and through their work. Unfortunately, the architect’s lack of agency, in part due to the traditional architecture business model, the profession’s codes of conduct, value system, and lack of ethical framework, does not make it possible for architects to act to the degree and with the speed that is required. “Future Practice” asks students to situate architecture practice in the larger context of our communities, cities, countries, and planet and ask: How do we value what we do as architects? What do we need to achieve in practice in order to pursue climate justice? How then do we create new, implementable value systems by which to restructure our work in order to align it with those goals? Using readings from a variety of different cross-disciplinary sources and thinkers, students will be encouraged to think beyond what practice is and into the radical realms of what practice could become in the future.



Architecture, Climate Change & Society 2021 Buell Center Course Development Prize

Professional Practice 3: Future Practice

Megan Groth, Woodbury University School of Architecture

Course Context

Arch 462 Professional Practice 3: Future Practice is the newest addition to the undergraduate professional practice sequence at Woodbury University, a sequence that roughly follows the progression of *Fundamentals of Practice*, *Project and Practice Development*, and *Future Practice*. Taken by 5th year B. Arch students in their last semester, the focus of this discussion-based seminar class is on preparing students to not only understand architecture practice as it exists today in order to be successful after graduation, but also to critically engage with what practice could become by proposing future modes of practice in light of current limitations, such as the climate crisis, architect's lack of agency, issues around work and labor, race, gender and social inequality. This course is designed to prepare Woodbury graduates to be leaders at the forefront of architecture, to be critical, imaginative and to work to create a profession that responds to the most pressing issues of our time. There is no future practice that does not engage with the climate crisis.

Course Description

We are at a time in history where everyone with any insight of the climate crisis that threatens our civilization – and the entire biosphere – must speak out in clear language, no matter how uncomfortable and unprofitable that may be.

We must change almost everything in our current societies. The bigger your carbon footprint, the bigger your moral duty. The bigger your platform, the bigger your responsibility.

Adults keep saying: "We owe it to the young people to give them hope." But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act.

I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.

Greta Thunberg at Davos, 2019

In the short term, some of the work to mitigate climate risk could create more economic activity. Yet we are facing the ultimate long-term problem. We don't yet know which predictions about the climate will be most accurate, nor what effects we have failed to consider. But there is no denying the direction we are heading. Every government, company, and shareholder must confront climate change.

Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock, 2020 Letter to Investors

40% - that is roughly the percentage of total greenhouse gases that are produced by the built environment. This direct relationship of the global climate crisis to the built environment – the realm of the architect – means that architects are uniquely positioned to respond to these challenges in their work. Unfortunately, the architect's lack of agency, in part due to the traditional architecture business model, the profession's codes of conduct, value system and lack of ethical framework, does not make it possible for architects to respond to the crisis to the degree that is required. Architects excuse their lack of proper engagement in environmental and societal issues through the logic of what Iris Marion Young describes as 'not my job' (see Zaha Hadid's comments about workers deaths in Qatar) – or the similarly defeating, 'if I don't do it (i.e. take this substandard, ethically dubious job), another architect will' (see recent work in Astana, Kazakhstan among many other contemporary and historic examples). The climate crisis is an ethical issue and yet the lack of solid ethical foundation in the architecture field, as well as a lack of creativity in regards to how business can be done in a more

inclusive way, leaves architects without many options to be socially and environmentally responsible. At a time when it is imperative that all business, development and building works engage with the climate crisis, there is no room for excuses. For architects, this radical change requires nothing less than imagining entirely new forms, frameworks and businesses of practice.

Course Schedule & Assignment

The course is roughly divided into 3 topics of discussion and cumulates in one assignment, a business plan for an architecture firm or initiative. The first two topics address what is happening in practice now in order to give students the context and background to be able to critically engage with the main topic of alternative future practices in the second half of the course.

Topic 1: Architecture Practice Today

The first part of the course reviews how architecture is most commonly practiced today and a brief history of 'how we got here'. Current business models, work plans, collaboration structures, contracts and legal issues will be discussed, as well as contemporary practice statistics to provide a well-rounded picture of the state of architecture practice, for better and for worse.

Topic 2: Challenges Facing Practice

The second part of the course examines forces external to architecture practice - climate crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, social inequality and how it relates to the built environment - and forces internal to architecture such as issues around work, automation, technology, race and gender, and political agency that are shaping practice. The readings and discussions jump across scales to emphasize the interconnectedness of the issues and how they relate to everyday architecture practice and business.

Topic 3: Alternative Approaches to Practice

The third part of the course asks students to rethink what architecture practice could be through examples of 'Architect as...': Developer, Community Leader, Public Actor, Consultant, Social Activist, and Maker. Each example showcases design practices that in some way embody these tropes and a detailed understanding of what each could mean through readings of theory, case studies and interviews with practitioners. Class discussions will encourage students to deconstruct what the architect does/is in each of those contexts, the value prescribed to the work/action of the architect and other stakeholders, and how definitions and existing frameworks can be challenged and/or developed further.

Assignment: Architecture Business Plan or Initiative

The primary hand-in for the course will be an actionable architecture business plan or initiative. Every plan will address a response to the climate crisis (as identified through a framework such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals) as well as a response to one or more social issues of the student's choosing (i.e. relating to diversity, gender equality, automation and other labor issues, community engagement, etc.). Business plans will include information about clients, billing and revenue streams, type of work, firm organization, management, marketing and outreach, and be backed by research presented in the class and from outside sources, as well as interviews with practitioners in the field. This requires students to engage with the business of architecture - actual and aspirational - in a real, practical way and situate it in the current context of practice. Business plans will be workshopped in small groups and presented in class at several points throughout the semester.

Selected Readings & Media

The course aims to provide students with a diverse range of voices, medias and sources for thinking about the issues presented in the larger context. The foundation of critical inquiry is based in the 'Architect as Worker' scholarship of the last few decades, with an emphasis on reassessing what is value as a way to bridge issues of work, labor, professional practice and ethics with thinking about

inequality and climate justice. The general themes for reading/listening and subsequent class discussion are social inequality, environmental crisis, diversity in architecture, technology & work.

A list of selected readings include:

Architecture Practice Today

The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, The Creative Class and the Politics of Design, edited by Peggy Deamer (Bloomsbury, 2015)

“Can Architects Be Socially Responsible?” Margaret Crawford in *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture* ed. Diane Ghirardo (Bay Press, 1991)

“Bjarke Ingels and the Art of Greenwashing” Alexander Hadley in *Failed Architecture*
<https://failedarchitecture.com/bjarke-ingels-and-the-art-of-greenwashing/> (2020)

‘The Rise and Fall of Default Man’, Grayson Perry in *The New Statesman*:
<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/10/grayson-perry-rise-and-fall-default-man> (2014)

Challenges Facing Practice

Responsibility for Justice, Iris Marion Young (Oxford University Press, 2011)

The Future We Choose: Surviving the Climate Crisis, Christina Figueres & Tom Rivett-Carnac (Knopf, 2020)

“Rethinking Value” Mariana Mazzucato, The Long Now Foundation Lecture
<https://longnow.org/seminars/02019/jun/24/rethinking-value/> (2019)

‘Why it’s time for doughnut economics’, Kate Raworth for TED:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BHOfIzXPjI> (2018)

Alternative Approaches to Practice

Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture, Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider & Jeremy Till (Routledge, 2011)

“Why Degrowth Shouldn’t Scare Businesses” Thomas Roulet & Joel Bothello in *Harvard Business Review* (2020)

“[Re]Constructing Real Estate: The Question of Value” Emmanuel Pratt, The Rachel Dorothy Tanur Memorial Lecture, Harvard University <https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/event/emmanuel-pratt/> (2020)

‘Architecture after Architecture’, Jeremy Till for The Architecture Foundation 100 Day Studio,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCBYAezddg0> (2020)

In class interview with Ron Rochon, Managing Partner of The Miller Hull Partnership, regarding the business case for sustainability, Living Buildings and opportunities in traditional practice