

# ***Catalyst Pedagogies and the Pandemic Displacement of Architectural Education***

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At the time of publication of this issue of *Charrette*, it has been over a year since the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a distancing from architectural education's established methods of teaching and learning in higher education. The manifestation of this impact can so far be perceived in two identifiable phases: an initial rapid response to the closure of universities and transitioning online, and a subsequent reevaluation and design of architecture programmes to be flexible in adapting to change and to be able to function well in a delivery that mediates between physical, in-person, and distanced, online, learning.

Tested and tried approaches adopted from models pursued at institutions such as the Open University or more recent experiences for online learning offered through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), could initially only be interpreted as promising the complete uprooting of an education founded on the social space of the architectural studio. Nevertheless, the first phase arrived with the anxiety of distance that the literal displacement of teaching architecture online entailed. This anxiety was not without grounds, given the pre-existing pressures on the extensive teaching space of architecture and its education, challenging a long-standing tradition that recognises the university as a critical space, and the architectural studio as a place of spatial discourse.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting complex relationships of apprenticeship and companionship between educator and learner, rooted in a sharing of practice as the means to a knowledge that is largely tacit,<sup>2</sup> non-curated and unrehearsed dialogues, collaborative and synchronous acts of making, drawing, and thinking, have long defined the space of architectural education and the type of tools and interactions it uses to nurture knowledge and culture. Hence, the prompt for this issue was not only born out of the mere practicalities of this unprecedented mass shift to an online mode of teaching, but also with the awareness of what had to be recognised and upheld as architecture's catalyst, definitive spatial pedagogies and their possible, yet meaningful, digital incarnations.

The question of displacement as an effect of a long announced 'digital turn' of architecture,<sup>3</sup> as both a material and subjective condition, has been articulated not only in the shift of education but also in the very subject-matter of architecture, which is nuanced by the physical-virtual exchanges with the omnipresent distributed spatiality of the digital. However, the initial sense of unreadiness and disturbance of delivering architectural education, in what had become a predominantly virtual space, perhaps illustrated that architectural education had not yet fully and consciously situated itself within the blended physical-virtual space definitive of contemporary everyday living. The temporary loss of the physical space, disclosed a psycho-social necessity for the availability and accessibility of physical space and deepening the appreciation of the affordances a physical space can create; and also provided an opportunity for uncompromised experimentations-providing a collective space, on both a local and global scale, for reflection, mapping of habitual practices against plausible futures and the conscious

disassembly and reassembly of architectural education for a more functional and seamless ecosystem. As is with any act of disassembly and reassembly, certain components and mechanisms may be realised as fundamental in the functioning and the structuring of what yields, whilst others may need amendments, replacement or disposal. The addition of new components and mechanism may also become useful. Therefore, even though the reassembled product may look the same, it expands the possibilities for its use and impact.

In light of the above and as reflected in the contributions made by the authors, this issue of Charrette gives way to the hope that, as we gradually move out of the pandemic, the concepts and methods introduced to our practice should not be seen to offer a substitution of what we have learnt to value within the disciplinary practice of architecture. Rather than a loss, or a response to the loss of physical space and interaction, the works presented in this issue reveal elements of an extended notion of spatiality in architectural education. Through a terminology of 'agility',<sup>4</sup> 'meta-morphosis',<sup>5</sup> 'reversal',<sup>6</sup> and 'engagement',<sup>7</sup> the works selected for this issue, reflect architectural education's dynamic reaction to the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for its evolution. This issue attempts to sketch out a first review of this emerging extended spatiality of architectural education, with both a cautionary appreciation of the pitfalls such paradigm shifts may entail, yet with an excitement about the openings and fermentations that new territories, virtual or material, can initiate. The complications and potential that the pandemic iterations of architectural education presented here have offered, reflect and nuance this extended spatiality is articulated not only across physical and digital articulations of space, but also in the temporal, structural and conceptual spaces created by the gaps between our pedagogical norms and habits.

### **B e t w e e n   s y n c h r o n y   a n d   a s y n c h r o n y**

One of the implications of distanced and online architectural teaching during the pandemic, was the 'space' created by the disjunction between synchronous and asynchronous aspects of delivery, communication and feedback. Whilst the habitual ways of architectural education rely on synchrony, the new mode of teaching enabled an examination of a different relationship with the temporality of the process through which work is produced. Synchronous modes of teaching have crucially nurtured what James Craig, Christos Kakalis and Matthew Ozga-Lawn emphasise, in their essay 'On Disjointed Bodies: Emergent spaces between the body and screen in pandemic-era architectural education', as a multi-modal space that situates the physical body as central to the type of communication and interaction that defines architectural design education, as itself an architectural space between the student, the educator and the work.<sup>8</sup> In the context of online teaching, however, the asynchrony experienced as a result of removing the physical body from the space of interaction acted as a centrifugal force in a separation of the materials and actions of architectural

education: drawing, reflecting, talking and feedback. In addition, in this new space, a proliferation of saving, cataloguing and archiving, not just the work in production but also the various actions of architectural education were realised. This was a space that enabled thoughts, sketches, and other forms of critical making, much of which can be fleeting and forgotten in the temporal development of a work to gain permanency and be readily accessible. The reduction of such temporal dependencies introduced a duality for acts of teaching and learning: off-line and online. Educators could review students' work off-line, giving more time for in-depth examination and using the real-time, online session to build on the feedback with the student; students could watch and reflect on pre-recorded materials and use the real-time, online session to engage in deeper conversations with the educator and other peers.

In this context, asynchrony led to a space enriched with information, that could be accessed at any time. The accessibility and usefulness of the wealth of material made available calls on the importance of curation in order to effectively unleash the pedagogic benefits of this newly realised space for practice. Not specific to the context of architectural education, John Bryson and Lauren Andres,<sup>9</sup> suggest that in a complete shift to online learning, the curation of the learning experience gains centre-stage, covering both extensive and intensive aspects. Curating the extensive learning experience requires selection and organisation of online learning support bundles and creation of learning roadmaps, and the intensive learning experience requires curation of activities that support engagement between students and educators. The broader literature in higher education also teaches us that curation needs not be regarded as an educator-driven activity, rather it can be utilised as a student and creation driven pedagogic tool, for both enhancing digital literacy and also teaching critical thinking, analysis and expression online.<sup>10</sup> Whilst the first phase of teaching during the pandemic (that in many instances disturbed an ongoing academic year), may have not allowed sufficient time for curating the roadmap and extensive learning experience Bryson and Andres refer to, as presented by Patrick Macasaet in 'The Agile, Culture-Building Hacker',<sup>11</sup> the temporary space of uncertainty created a new terrain for collaboration and engagement, in deciding and curating both the content and platform of online learning in parallel, facilitating a reiterative and co-evolving condition for development of both the intense and extensive aspects of the learning experience. Moreover, as we are reminded by Craig, Kakalis and Ozga-Lawn, and particularly in Kakalis and Ivan Marquez-Munoz's brief, collecting and curating has a long-standing status and has formed an integral part of the architectural designer's critical toolkit.<sup>12</sup> Even though the performative qualities of the design studio as a 'forensic site'<sup>13</sup> of architectural knowledge production is to a degree lost, architectural education's temporally and digitally expanded spatiality offers new sites for situation, display and appropriation of making, which introduce not only the digital but also the remote and intimate. The design projects and briefs that Craig, Kakalis and Ozga-Lawn discuss, examine the 'unalignment' of expression and subjectivity,<sup>14</sup> across a range of sites within architectural education, underlining the role

of the architectural space as critical situations through a reflection on architectural devices and artefacts. Thus, they make explicit the significance of the studio as a space of not simply co-production but also of shared agency.<sup>15</sup>

If then, before the pandemic, digital contexts for design practice often painted their potential in a light of convergence and systemisation of the creative design process,<sup>16</sup> environments such as Conceptboard discussed by Macasaet, CANVAS or even Sansar, have made room for the creation of (almost) infinite archives of architectures and their representations, in the form of digital cities<sup>17</sup> or 'image atlases',<sup>18</sup> that foreground and extend the appropriation of visual media. These emerge as alternatives to the vulnerable temporality of the studio installation, as discussed by Craig, Kakalis and Ozga-Lawn. In this hybrid future of architectural education, which has by now introduced the permanence of the digital representation more actively within the recording of all three: the architectural subject, the architectural object and their educational interaction, the act of curation and display emerges as a key issue of both educational and architectural design.

The dominance of asynchrony especially experienced in the earlier phases of online teaching, also instigated a desire for the revival and preservation of synchronous habits and socially charged events. Macasaet's article offers one manifestation of how the aim of maintaining an 'immersive, didactic, discursive and collaborative culture' generated a 'hacker mindset',<sup>19</sup> eager to absorb, abstract and re-appropriate the subject matter provided by foreign media, and in doing so enabling a divergent approach to making. In other words, in some ways, asynchrony created a newfound appreciation for what was and what could become available within a synchronous space. By navigating from more static environments to dynamic and immersive platforms for thinking, interaction and making, Macasaet's studio unveiled a realisation for the gamification of the architectural learning experience that allows the exploration of architectural proposals at a 1:1 scale, bringing finer-grained aspects of the proposal not necessarily evident in conventional drawings into the space of discussion and reflection.<sup>20</sup> What such efforts display, is the opportunity that lies in traversing between synchrony and asynchrony and the mapping of their associative paradigms to allow alternative modes of architecture and architectural education to arise and settle within a space of difference. Therefore, alternative paths and pedagogies that are rooted within this space, need not be regarded as disruptive. Rather as Jolanda Morkel, Hermie Delpont, Lindy Osborne Burton, Mark Olweny and Steven Feast propose, in the essay 'Towards an Ecosystem-of-Learning for Architectural Education', they can be seen to form a self-sustainable ecosystem that is capable of regenerating and, in doing so, accommodating not only morphing and growth but also failure and disappearance as means of development.<sup>21</sup> Iterating between, as well as amalgamating synchronous and asynchronous approaches, in turn, necessitates the parallel synergy of models for delivery, interaction and assessment. Kate Tregloan and James Thompson project 'Buckle up! ... BEL+T Learnings from a (very) fast move online', presents a

learning design system that was developed, learnt from and matured within this space and aimed to achieve a balance between both modes of in-person and online delivery, interaction and assessment.<sup>22</sup> This space, as described by the authors, called for a refocusing on the design of student-focused learning experiences, situating and re-emphasising the centrality of engagement and sense of belonging in the design of the learning experience, wherever it may occur.

As illuminated through the contributions in this issue of Charrette, the temporary placement of architectural education in a space between synchrony and asynchrony, when treated with deliberation and reflection, renders the arguably taken-for-granted aspects of its culture visible, allowing for a re-examination of the old in light of the new as well as exploration of conceptual and practical possibilities through which it can grow and adapt meanwhile maintain and sustain its identity.

#### **B e t w e e n   d i s a s s e m b l y   a n d   r e a s s e m b l y**

Besides implications on the temporality of methods of practice in architectural education, the experience of the pandemic also challenged the structures of teaching and learning. As Macasaet underlines, the flattening of the teaching topography during the experience of the collaborative testing of multiple platforms, resulted in a subversion of hierarchical structures of acting, presenting and communicating, which created new opportunities for participation.<sup>23</sup> The opportunity latent in the disassembly and reassembly of architectural education's established hierarchy is further presented by Constance Lau, in the article 'Learning from World Architecture Festival 2015';<sup>24</sup> which proposes a 'rhizomic' framing of architectural education as an 'open' system, within which multi-vocality can give way to more participatory routes for architectural education. In Lau's terms, the space of production, thinking and learning is non-linear and polyphonic.<sup>25</sup> In this space, meanings arise not through convergence, negotiation of voices, subsuming of one voice within another or one event within the next, but rather through orchestrating the multiple voices present, within the collective space of practice.<sup>26</sup> The structural opening for methods of practice created during the pandemic, enabled pursuits for a polyphonic space in architectural education that had already been under examination prior to the pandemic, to offer guidance for the post-pandemic reassembly of architectural education. Reflecting on flexibility of how the World Architecture Festival charrette (a joint event between students in UK and Singapore) was run, Lau advocates for treating design practice as a 'continuous development',<sup>27</sup> a space imbued with a flux of conditions and possibilities, and the outcome of the practice as a 'montage of dialogues'.<sup>28</sup> By emphasising the role of dialogue, in supporting a polyphonic and open system, the author invites a re-examination of the notion of engagement, as a way to a more personalised experience of architecture for students and educators alike.

Whilst the flattening of the conventional teaching topography can be regarded an opportunity, Craig, Kakalis and Ozga-Lawn warn of the flattening of 'subjective differences',<sup>29</sup> through the dissolution of the physical space for teaching and learning, which in turn is argued to cut short the horizon for multi-vocality and multiple perspectives. They explain how the condition of 'screen-living' no longer tolerates the idiosyncrasies of embodied interactions within the course of teaching.<sup>30</sup> Silence, for example, which can be used as a means for reflection in a physical space, in the digital distance, instead, becomes a sign of malfunctioning. The subordination of the body in this space of practice and governance of continuous focus and engagement, compromises the physical and mental health of our bodies. This kind of displacement of subjectivity cannot be regarded as conducive to the type of polyphonic and collaborative space advocated by Macasaet and Lau.<sup>31</sup> Suggestively therefore, the placement of architectural education in a space of disassembly and reassembly, renders the capacity of structures of teaching and learning for embodiment, as significant.

Moreover, within this space of recalibration, Morkel, Delpont, Osborne Burton, Olweny and Feast, celebrate an opening for drawing on a range of pedagogies, some not previously fully explored in architectural education, in proposing their ecosystem of learning, offering a novel clustering of pedagogies for application in architectural education.<sup>32</sup> In reflecting on the conditions of teaching and learning during the pandemic, the authors locate a 'metamorphic' cluster of pedagogies, that is considered dialogic by nature, as a foundation of the ecosystem,<sup>33</sup> prioritising customised learning paths for the individual engagement of each student, relationship building and equal power distribution.

What the contributions of this issue therefore call on, is a closer look at the ethical implications of extant structures of teaching and learning. What became evident through the displaced experience of architectural education, is the usefulness of considering the values and practices that lie at the periphery of the dominant framework for architectural education. This allows *other* practices not to be presented as mere alternatives or critiques of the dominant framework but as viable avenues for dialogue, reflection and growth of architectural education.

#### **B e t w e e n   l o c a t i o n   a n d   p r e s e n c e**

The digital re-siting of the education process, brought upon by the pandemic, expanded the possibilities and choices for how students and educators present themselves in the space of interaction, ranging from audio-only, avatars, anonymous presence as well as use of blurred backgrounds and contexts. In eliminating the necessity of being co-located, in order to engage in acts of teaching and learning, these virtual teaching spaces extended accessibility and connection to a more international community. This space, carried with it both positive and negative implications. On the positive

sides, as Morkel, Delport, Osborne Burton, Olweny and Feast underline, a carefully and intentionally curated digital teaching context has the potential of providing a safe and supporting environment, particularly for minority groups that may have felt unwelcome in traditional studio spaces.<sup>34</sup> Craig, Kakalis and Ozga-Lawn also reflect on the added functions and opportunities for expression made available in the space of interactions, such as in online lectures, where students can post questions without necessarily needing to be verbally present.<sup>35</sup> However, a noticeable negative implication in this digitised articulation of architectural education, has been the lack of equal access to stable internet connection and the requirement of software and equipment that are not equally available to many students and educators. This individual reliance on hardware and software infrastructure involved in online teaching, has been detrimental for the achievement of an inclusive learning experience. Adjustments and changes made to mitigate the impact could only be seen as a compromise, where what was possible was limited in most cases to lowering the threshold of expectations, with regards to the learning outputs.

How the space of practice affects opportunities for presence within that space, was really brought to light, necessitating a rethinking for a more inclusive approach to community building and establishing a sense of belonging in architectural education, as a collective space of practice. Digital spaces such as Macasaet's *City of Gold*<sup>36</sup> or Lau's emphasis on digital-social systems of informal communication and interaction,<sup>37</sup> demonstrate that there are opportunities for rethinking and extending the social space of architectural education. This is reciprocated by Morkel, Delport, Osborne Burton, Olweny and Feast, who discuss the heightened relevance of social presence in an online environment in order for participants to be present and to facilitate affective connectedness.<sup>38</sup> The morphology of the socio-spatial practice of architectural education, will inevitably affect the type of learning culture that can be experienced in this discipline. In this extended space of possibilities, and in ensuring an alignment of methods of delivery and learning objectives, Tregloan and Thompson bring light to a need for a more overt clarification of roles and setting of tone by the educator.<sup>39</sup> From a different perspective, discursive tools such as the design studio brief as illustrated in the work of Craig, Kakalis and Ozga-Lawn, make possible the framing of distance and silence as productive frames of criticality,<sup>40</sup> illustrating socio-spatial presence as a way of reevaluating and recalibrating pedagogic approaches within the 'ecosystem of learning'.<sup>41</sup>

The contributions in the issue of Charrette, demonstrate how the choice of presence afforded by a space of practice, gradually gives shape to the norms and expectation of actions and expressions within that space. The lack of dependency on a physical location for how one presents oneself brought about by the virtual space, not only discloses new possibilities for enhanced engagement of a more diverse student body, but also conceals a reading of the silence and subsequent acts of peer support. This is, thus, a space in which the learning content and the interaction with it require curation. And,



furthermore, the social facet of the learning experience that is key to nurturing a sense of belonging, also calls for a form of curation. Whilst educators may be able to curate the social space during a timetabled session online, much of the social learning experience that supports students occurs beyond the official class time. Here is where the significance of the physical space becomes once again heightened. Being physically located in a physical space facilitates unrehearsed and serendipitous encounters with one another, as it both removes the constraints of time (as experienced in online sessions, which have to occur in a fixed time period) and the need for an active participation (visually or auditory) to indicate presence in the social circle. In essence, the experience of pandemic teaching catalyses the importance of the physical spaces of teaching and learning as a social capital for higher education institutions,<sup>42</sup> and should be a considered aspect in the design of learning approaches and systems, post-pandemic.

#### **T o w a r d s   a   s p a c e   o f   e x p a n d e d   p a r t i c i p a t i o n**

The experience of teaching within the pandemic has augmented into the space of architectural education, a digitised rendition of conventional practices, such as curation, collaboration, dialogue, etc. In doing so, it has strengthened the conative power of such practices, and its potential for reflecting, as we return to campuses, on an architectural learning roadmap that will embrace a new appreciation and perception of architectural space: as subject matter, and as a critical methodological and pedagogical tool. As illuminated in the contributions presented in this issue of Charrette, the space of architectural education, be it physical, conceptual, virtual or blended, at its very core is participatory, and thus needs to be constructed with and by (rather than merely for) the people that are involved in the educational process. This participatory quality is expressed and instrumentalised in two ways.

Firstly, the social nature of the processes that define architectural education define it as a collaborative field that relies on polyphony and nurturing the emancipation of the learner. Evidently, resonated within the contributions, was the idea that spaces for ethical and inclusive practice, should accommodate the individuality and background of those contributing to the educational process (students, educators, etc.), as well as their mental and physical capacities to entice meaningful engagement, celebrating the presence of each voice as an integral component in the formation of the educational space. An extended space for architectural education, is thus emerging within the discipline, for the growth and further examination of grounded and inductive approaches to teaching and learning, which may have once operated at the periphery of the dominant framework for architectural education.

Within this ecosystem that is metamorphic in principle, an allowance is also created for organic and fluid migrations across physical, virtual, temporal, geographical but also conventional and conceptual boundaries, and flexible

methods of delivery, interaction and assessment, as the course of teaching and learning necessitates, without change being perceived as a form of constraint or set-back. The second participatory dimension of the space of architectural education is then articulated in the agency that its expanded range of sites contribute to the production of architectural meaning and knowledge, which in the digital context of the pandemic has been extended to new media environments. Architectural education co-locates visual and auditory explorations of ideas through processes of drawing and talking, as processes of a collaborative, participatory process of knowledge production, not only through nominal but also through representational spaces of virtuality, be they physical or digital. Educators and learners engage through architectural media in a process of learning that is carried out not only by means of individual acts of representation and enunciation but also through the shared agency of spaces, artefacts and communities. In this context, the learnings acquired from the pedagogic implications of online curation, can inform architecture's disciplinary core of representation, archiving and curation as useful hinges towards a hybrid future of architectural education. Undetermined by their analogue or digital context, the expansions that the works presented in this issue, draw out both conceptual and physical spaces of action and knowledge production that take advantage of architecture's inherent ability to 'appropriate' other conventions, disciplines and emerging cultures of mediation.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout the contributions, perhaps what presented itself as one of the key challenges, is how to preserve, but also reimagine and recreate the unrehearsed and tacit essence of the participatory experience of teaching and learning devoid of physical space. In mapping out not the loss, but the expanded dimensions of a space for architectural education, what we hope these contributions also offer is the promise of a culture of architectural education that indeed emerges as 'agile', not ever surrendering the intimacy of the physical but rather capable of transfiguring, transposing and embracing its spatial tactics of situation, curation, representation and social occupation, as catalysts for the architectural appropriation of the emergent modalities of the digital distance foregrounded by the pandemic.

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