

# ***Nurturing Architecture: Education, research and practice for health and wellbeing***

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Nurturing Architecture explores how an ethos of care, of providing nourishment and supporting growth and development, might be understood as a founding principle for architectural education and practice. The term allows multiple interpretations, which include the concept of an 'architecture that nurtures' and/or the 'nurturing of architecture' itself as discipline and practice, as well as implying an exploration of how we might 'nurture architects' by caring for future (and current) architects in education and practice. Inherent in these responsibilities is the notion of wellbeing and the way in which architects and educators consider the wellbeing of future and current generations of users and other stakeholders, as well as the future and current wellbeing of a community of architects, academics, and students.

Wellbeing is often associated with nurturing and flourishing: 'the experience of life going well [...] feeling good and functioning effectively'.<sup>1</sup> Wellbeing in this sense is analogous with aspects of social sustainability and is embedded in design approaches such as co-design, participatory design, live projects, and community engagement, as well as many other innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to embedding socially aware and ethical design values in the process of education. The design of the built environment can contribute towards many positive aspects of subjective mental health and wellbeing including: self-actualisation, the will to meaning, individuation or happiness.<sup>2</sup> It is important to emphasise that wellbeing is not just about healthcare buildings.<sup>3</sup> Wellbeing is a much broader and diffuse concept that provides the discipline with a positive aspiration, a means to living well;<sup>4</sup> an everyday resource that enables people to lead individually, socially, and economically productive lives.<sup>5</sup>

This issue of *Charrette* was conceived during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has inevitably highlighted the importance of health and wellbeing. The pandemic has already affected billions of people worldwide, while half of the world's population has experienced some form of lockdown.<sup>6</sup> All sectors of society, every school of architecture, academic, architect, and student, have been severely affected during this pandemic with significant impacts on physical, mental, and social health. As we emerge from this pandemic, it is a timely moment to reflect upon the need for more nurturing environments and relationships in all of the senses outlined here.

Exploring an 'architecture that nurtures' requires critically exploring the potential impacts and influences that architecture and the design of the built environment may have. This theme relates to the mechanisms through which the built environment, educational landscapes, and research/knowledge contexts might be a force for nurturing healthy, resilient, democratic communities. At a theoretical and pedagogical level, the theme encourages exploration of ethics and values. This raises troublesome questions, such as how agency, architecture, and wellbeing interact; whether nurturing pedagogical praxis can challenge dominant ideological and philosophical

theories; or might architectural interventions that hinder wellbeing emerge from contemporary political and capitalist mechanisms?<sup>7</sup>

### The nurturing of architecture: concepts, intuitions, aspirations

This collection of texts opens the discussion of the role of the profession in developing, improving, updating, protecting, and caring for the discipline of architecture. Recent debates around expanding the field of architecture introduce other voices, ethics, ontologies, and actors to the architecture ecosystem. The emergence of disruptive interdisciplinary approaches is changing the existing profile of the architectural profession. The nurturing of architecture (as a discipline, as an industry, and as a pedagogical context) requires support, consensus, and collaboration, as well as critique and dissensus to remain relevant to contemporary challenges. This raises potentially provocative and radical concerns, such as how the profession might address issues such as health and wellbeing in a neo-liberal market economy, how the involvement of a new generation of diverse, politically-active architects might transform the profession, and whether the discipline of architecture can adapt, evolve and change in order to remain relevant, responsive and nurturing.<sup>8</sup> This approach is key for pedagogy, to ensure that all participants involved in education and learning are treated as co-creators of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Architects, architecture students, and architecture educators have been taught to consider all stakeholders, clients, users, and the society we are a part of. Alongside this, however, we also need to consider our role in nurturing the individuals, students, and academics, who make up the schools of architecture and the profession. Architecture education has long been thought of as a process with a potentially detrimental effect on both mental and physical health and wellbeing. The challenge of nurturing and caring for a diverse range of students and academics in a way that also pursues excellence in architectural design is an ongoing challenge. This, again, raises potentially pedagogic and professional concerns, such as whether teaching and learning practices are compromising the wellbeing of architecture students and academics; whether we can develop more nurturing models of pedagogy; how the profession might better support architects' wellbeing; and whether a nurturing model of practice could support more diverse representation in the profession.

The act of nurturing can be considered the embodiment of care for and encouragement of growth or development. It demands fostering and cultivating the object of our care or cherishing and treasuring a feeling or state (hope, love, etc.) within oneself. The discussion on nurture in the context of higher education resonates with a series of questions on the nature of the relationship between academics and students. What the students need to

achieve their full potential may demand a certain orchestration of steps or enunciations of concepts that at times ask for special considerations. These considerations will be different for everyone and not necessarily compliant with the demands of the public that expect the leadership of industries - a task that Universities implicitly promise. What then, should be the role of this relation between academics and students for the assertion of leadership and production of knowledge? Should students be passive recipients thereof or are they to assume a more active, responsible, and independent role as agents of change? Hoping for the latter and liberated by the structures architectural pedagogic contexts offer, it is common for academics at architectural departments to include a softly spoken expectation of creative development to assignment briefs. This requires a more involved and participatory arrangement, where the students are nurtured and expected to become independent, thereby able to direct and, in turn, care for their educational experience knowingly.

Michel Foucault, a known critic of educational systems, suggests that '[o]ne cannot attend to oneself, take care of oneself, without a relationship to another person'.<sup>10</sup> Here, Foucault unfolds his understanding of the problematics in the functioning of educational institutions, proposing that the production of the mechanisms of self-care is contingent on the regulations that come from relationality with the other. Nurture, which in its definition suggests relationality, will, under Foucault's definition, regulate the mechanisms of self-care. One can easily discard this sentiment as too abrasive, restrictive, and inappropriate to many. Although, this sentiment indicates a significance in the production and leadership of a professional discipline – regulated through creative impulses shrouded as *design* or legislation.

The contributions in this issue of *Charrette* provide insights on and critical explorations of the concept of 'nurturing architecture' by answering the questions raised above. These contributions present the changing landscape of architectural education in various ideological contexts. The discussed cases suggest a need for a more compassionate and empowering approach to education - one that braces students for the new challenges they will be expected to face. They stress the importance of assuming a strong sense of agency in pursuing professional sensibilities, self-care, and wellbeing. To discuss the need for architectural education to adapt and remain relevant, James Thompson and Huiseung (Sarah) Song explore how to develop a nurturing learning environment through the organisation and facilitation of student learning experiences. The practice-based research examines how to enhance wellbeing through the delivery, interaction, and assessment of a supportive learning environment. Essential ingredients for wellbeing characteristics are mapped out against the various aspects of the teaching and learning process in architecture schools. Creating a nurturing learning ecosystem requires care for student wellbeing to be fully embedded as an integral and fundamental dimension of teaching practice.<sup>11</sup>

Looking more closely at the educational praxis, Helen Duong and Peter Brew look at the philosophical dimensions of professional practice studies, particularly exploring ethical and pedagogical approaches. Applying critical theory to codes of practice, among other features, suggests a shift from focusing on the architect to focusing on architecture. They offer examples of students constructing frameworks of values for professional registration and articulation of their manifestos, where the identification of the beneficiaries of the profession becomes meaningful.<sup>12</sup>

The challenges that result from neo-liberal contexts and their impact on education emerge as a theme picked up by several papers that discuss how agency and wellbeing can interact. In the article 'The Elephant in the Room: How neoliberal architecture education undermines wellbeing', Igea Troiani criticises the insidious presence of neoliberal ideology in the working and educational places of architecture. By observing how profitability and competition drive the discipline, she highlights how this 'academic capitalism' is blindly perpetuated by all actors hindering the emergence of more nurturing pathways where alternative values might flourish. She suggests models that start confronting the still pending pressures that architecture and its education suffer by analysing diverse cases.<sup>13</sup> To complement Troiani's work, Charles Drożyński proposes a model for the relation between students and scholars in the contemporary context of the UK higher education underpinned by the 'freedom to develop'. In doing so, Drożyński refers to Gilles Deleuze and Bernard Cache's relationship and its orchestration. As a consequence, the paper presents a narrative of the relation between the two, and how concepts raised by both were accepted by the other, nurturing a creative attitude to architecture.<sup>14</sup>

The role of agency in an educational context is discussed by Mark Olweny, Jolanda Morkel, Hermie Delpert, Deborah Wehlan, and Alex Ndibwami. Their paper comprises a personal account of pedagogy in architecture schools in the sub-Saharan context of Africa. The text is a candid expression of concern for students, their wellbeing, and their ability to participate in the architectural course. The paper circles on reflections from ten stories that illustrate the challenging situations of students who demonstrate a high level of resilience while facing issues of asymmetrical power relations.<sup>15</sup> In a similar tone and emphasizing the role of politically-active communities, Giuseppe Resta emphasises the importance of community involvement in shaping places of nurture. By acting in the spirit of the commons, the project of a public micro-library emerges from a local story to become a nurturing place for different stakeholders sharing books. The constructed communal place shows a progressive process of commitment of volunteers, local administrators, and architects who democratically negotiate the situations that challenge the survival of the small pavilion.<sup>16</sup> In the same vein, Alice Grant and Rosa Turner Wood present their collaboration to explore how new generations of diverse agents can transform the architectural educational environment.

As co-founding members of MatriArch, which is presented as a disruptive activist group within the Sheffield School of Architecture, they have tried to challenge the current constructed nature of architecture, advocating for a significant change in the working culture of the profession. In 'Nurture Over Nature: Debunking the traditions of architecture school', activism is placed as the critical mechanism within the architectural school to provoke significant reform to what is currently taught. MatriArch argues that it is time to debunk the historical traditions on which the current schools of architecture stand; architectural students want changes for a more balanced, healthier profession.<sup>17</sup>

### **Architecture that nurtures: buildings, contexts, workers**

If the diversity of approaches to the theme already suggests ways in which nurture can be promoted, the origin of the word reminds us of the supply of what is required for an organism to grow and develop. Following this analogy, one may argue that the blossoming of the collective construction one calls architecture would depend significantly on what we, as a collective, feed it with. The buildings would be required to embody the physiological nourishing qualities of safety, care, comfort and shelter, but not only. Architecture would also need to include qualities nurturing in other meaningful individual and collective senses.

All sorts of contextual conditions would come to underpin the nourishing power of architecture and placemaking. Architectural production appears strongly influenced by social and economic forces. This manifold of powers manifests not only as geographical and physical conditions, but also as innumerable collective cultural identities, memories and narratives, ideologies, networks of trade and power, mechanisms of repression, and so on. If architecture is to respond effectively as a discipline, architects should learn to navigate identifying this complexity to be overcome holistically, for instance, challenges such as climate change or energy consumption, on the one hand, and migratory shelter and democratisation of collective spaces, on the other. An interdisciplinary and insightful practice should make it possible for architectural education and industry to achieve more holistically nurturing spaces.

Finally, as educators, we cannot ignore that nurturing and cherishing the human qualities of our workforce most likely contribute to health conditions that, ideally, permeate the outcomes of our professional performance. This infiltration of general wellbeing and health conditions may invite – when suitably attuned with our activity – the production and reproduction of models, where values such as inclusion, empathy, compassion, acceptance, tolerance, among others, remain central. This would apply to architectural workers of any sort and level, but also importantly, we should be able to avoid

that our design decisions impact the lives of other human and non-human species. It is in keeping cultivation and care as constantly central in our critical agency that it might be possible to find paths towards a more nurturing world.

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