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Opening the “black-box” of interior design education: The assessment of basic design project work

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Abstract

Interior design education differs from education in other disciplines due to its use of design studio as the setting for project based reflective learning environment. This setting is criticized for being a pedagogy derived from a preexisting ‘apprenticeship’ model that reproduces prevalent and dominant notions of “architectural habitus.” This paper carries out a case study on the first year basic design course of 26 interior architecture students in Turkey over one semester to discuss how “thinking like an architect” has been transmitted by critics to the new members of the profession.

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1. Introduction

Interior design education and architectural education differ from education in other disciplines due to its use of design studio as the setting for project based reflective learning environment. This setting is currently criticized for being a pedagogy derived from a preexisting ‘apprenticeship’ model that reproduces prevalent and dominant notions of “architectural *habitus*.” Considering this critique becomes crucial in case of first year basic design studio, owing to its role in introducing students with the required skills for becoming a reflective practitioner. Architectural education does not foster these reflective skills just through the transfer of know-how. Instead they are developed by the students over the studio courses and design juries.

The paper conceives design juries as a key pedagogic critic-centered event, rather than an examination in educational curriculum. Current literature on design juries handles a large number of topics, of which this paper mentions but a few: Discussions on the effectiveness of different techniques in design juries (Seymour, 2008), emotional and general psychological issues in design studio (Ochsner, 2000), knowledge and its transfer in the studio (Uluoğlu, 2000), discussions on assessment criteria (Çıkış & Çil, 2008; Uzunoğlu & Uzunoğlu, 2011). However, most of these sources do not carry out an in-depth analysis of jury member-student exchanges and “there continues to be considerable disagreement about what is learnt and how” (Webster, 2007) in juries. On this disagreement Webster states that

[w]hile critical pedagogues argue that the design jury is a critic-centred event that coerces students into conforming to hegemonic notions of *habitus*, those who promote reflective practice see it as a

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student-centred event in which a critical dialogue with experts supports students' construction and reconstruction of their own *habitus*. (2007)

So the question is whether critics should dictate what a designer should do according to their formulations or whether they should act as facilitators who help students to discover their own formulations.

To address this question, the paper carries out a case study on the first year basic design course of 26 interior architecture students in Turkey over one semester to discuss tacitly generated 'architectural *habitus*' during the design juries. By devising a dense representation of the design jury, the paper analyzes the final jury with particular attention to how "thinking like an architect" has been transmitted by critics to new members of the profession, that is, how the espoused theory of the professors is communicated to the students. The researcher observed (as a participant) the course, two interim juries and the final jury. To analyze the final jury, the researcher made a content analysis to indicate themes across students' and critics' verbalizations, and then conducted a protocol analysis to reveal the relationships among verbalizations.

2. Design Juries

Good assessment is explained to have two purposes: Guiding, motivating and reinforcing student learning; and assuring "academic institutions that academic standards are being maintained" (Webster, 2007). This paper focuses on the first purpose, which is very much like a 'black-box' as how critics actually guide and motivate students needs to be analyzed more thoroughly. Previous researches underline that most professors in design schools lack "pedagogical training, and they, like their students, "learn by doing"; the quality of their teaching is contingent on their experience, awareness, and talent" (Goldschmidt, Hochman, & Dafni, 2010, p .286). In a nutshell, this is the apprenticeship model.

There is no universally accepted design teaching theory or pedagogy in architecture. However, to interpret case studies, we need to define a level of, maybe not excellence, but a stepping stone to compare the analyzed data. Hence, the paper refers to J. K. Ochsner's research, which gives us a psychoanalytic perspective on interactions between instructors and students within the studio environment (2000). Ochsner compares the interaction between studio instructor and students to the psychoanalytic relationship between therapist and patient. To improve critics in design studios, he suggests gaining insight from the psychoanalytic methods, which is built upon a process that reveals and actually mirrors the thoughts of people to themselves. This approach is actually concurrent with the pedagogy espoused by the case study basic design course. Likewise, Ochsner, especially referring to interactions with beginning students, proposes guidance and motivation tactics for studio instructors as follows:

The challenge to the studio instructor, however, is twofold: first, to make critiques in such a way that the student sees the work as a valid, if failed, attempt –that is that the nature of creative play is that it sometimes does lead to "dead ends;" and second, to provide an interpretive focus that not only indicates problems, but also reveals opportunities or possible directions for further exploration. In this sense, even critique can be seen as interpretation –that is, it is important not just to tell the student what is a problem, but to show the student that possibilities nonetheless can be sought in what the student has offered (2000, p.206).

Especially for beginning students, who are foreign to the design process, he encourages instructors to reveal possibilities within their designs so that they would take risk, would not use psychic defenses for the sake of achieving some success.

2.1. Background to the case study

The present case study is based on the final design jury of the basic design course of a department of interior architecture. The course lasted 12 weeks with two meetings, each lasting 4 hours. As a student-centered studio, this course does not intend to teach design, but to enable students to find out how they would design. To do this, the course curriculum is built upon ways to detach students from their studying habits, while intending to make them discover their own way of designing, that is, their own language. In this discovery process, "the important issue is to focus attention on the thought processes that lie behind the design" (Sağlam, 2012). So, how the meaning or the

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