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Notes on architectural education: An experimental approach to design studio

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to share a new method in architectural design studio teaching. In order to overcome the problems related to the pedagogy of the architectural design studio, an experiment was conducted in both fall and spring semesters of the 2010-2011 academic year and fall semester of the 2011-2012 academic year in Architectural Design Studio 4 in Yıldız Technical University Faculty of Architecture, Istanbul. The process was designed to eliminate the pairing up of a single tutor and a student. Every week one single consultation and one group review where all of the studio teachers overviewed the projects together was constituted. After completion of the experiment, a questionnaire for both students and tutors was conducted. The paper presents the main findings of the questionnaire and discusses possible future scenarios of the architectural design studio.

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1. Introduction

The discussions related to architectural practice are diversified and complicated. However there is very limited ongoing debate about its education. As the discipline is located in between science and fine arts, involving theory and practice, its education is also situated in a luminal position. This condition has many facets. In terms of educational research it has both potentials and disadvantages. Broadly speaking, an architect mainly designs and builds buildings and structures, and the education of an architect has to involve the practice of this activity. However this activity is a very challenging one because it involves integration of nearly all of the competences that are gained during architectural education in one site-specific design which is result of a process that includes constant critical

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interrogation. According to Uluoğlu (2000; 34) “designing is not simply an act of doing. If it was merely an activity, based on certain skills, then it could be taught by instruction. But we know that it also requires reasoning, which strips it from being merely an action, and takes it to another level where it is now considered as praxis. Here, the activities are not merely impulsive, habitual or coincidental, but rather conscious, selective and intelligent. Hence, it is supposed to embody knowledge of architecture and design in general, but still providing the individual with the tools of applying this general knowledge to the solution of specific cases, and with a personal style.”As can be followed from the quote, since design activity is a very complex one, its teaching involves an advanced pedagogy. According to Koolhaas (1991), teaching in the design studio means empowering students to interpret; it means introducing them to tools to explore, and multiple angles from which to transform, “given circumstances”, rather than merely “create within [them] more or less masterful buildings”.To achieve this, self-critique is an important instrument. However, as stated by Philippou (2001),in conventional design studio critical understanding of the design process is not normally viewed as a central pursuit of the design studio.

Architectural design studio is the only place where the activity to design an architectural project is experimented. Therefore statements presented above underline the importance of interrogating the architectural design studio.

1.1. Literature Review on Architectural Design Studio Pedagogy

Ever since the teaching of architecture has been carried into the studios of the schools of architecture, teaching of design is realized in many different ways, with critique as the backbone of different experiences of studio masters (Uluoğlu, 2000).When evaluating the subject in history in terms of formal architectural education, we first come across the Ecole des Beaux Arts in France in 1819. In the Ecole des Beaux Arts, under the French name atelier -just a step forward from the medieval apprenticeship system- designers worked in a master’s workshop for several years, until they were considered qualified to work on their own, having acquired sufficient knowledge and skills, and the master’s design approach and methods. At the Ecole des Beaux Arts a student was admitted to the atelier of one master, and stayed there throughout his or her education (Goldschmidt et al., 2010). Undoubtedly compared to the traditional teaching methods, the framework that contemporary design studios of architectural schools present worldwide is a very different one. Currently the student comes across at least 8-10 studio tutors during their academic program. Even though this creates a diversified medium, as in most of the schools the traces of the traditional teaching methods continue, this creates problems in terms of architectural education. Current teaching of design skills depends basically on master-apprentice relations and repetition exercises, or on the systematic knowledge of a field as in CAD applications (Uluoğlu, 2000). Therefore, it can be easily stated that are nearly no theory of design pedagogy and also very limited number of educational experiments.

The studio becomes the main medium of architectural design education, and the conversation (mainly attributed as critique) between student and the tutor becomes the means of this education. Here the student is expected to learn by doing. However the conversation, which may be in one of the following forms as one-on-one, desk or jury critique, is a very fragile one. According to Goldschmidt et al. (2010)many students often misinterpret a critique of their work as waged against them in person, which may result in anger, hurt feelings, or resistance. On the other hand many students, especially in the early stages of their studies, are quite dependent on their teachers, and feel insecure until they receive from the teacher both approval and explicit guidance for the advancement of their projects. Even though the forms of critique are very determining, there is too limited knowledge on the pedagogy of these critics. Schön (1985) identified that learning in design studio begins with ill-defined problems, a general characteristic of professional education, and observed that learning in the studio developed through a process he called ‘reflection-in-action’.Quayle (1985) states that there are three major profiles of the tutor:

- Instructor as source of expertise or authority
- Instructor as coach or facilitator
- Instructor as “buddy”

However it is difficult to sustain a continuous position of the different profiles as outlined by Quayle. Yet as the profiles of students are also different, changing the attitude of the tutor related to the student might be a more constructive approach.

Besides, according to Uluoğlu (2000) problems in teaching design arise from two main areas. One is that there is no consensus on the content of design knowledge to be taught at architecture schools at different levels. This

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