

Theory Space: The Architecture Studio

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ABSTRACT

Somewhere around the late 60's, the architectural studio underwent a 'conceptual' turn which, some fifty years later, would unknowingly become the model for the now fashionable 'start-up', 'business incubator' and 'think-tank' spaces that have sprung up from the venture capital and crowdfunding economies. This article highlights five of the features of the post 60's architectural studio environment, which make it into a specific kind of creative generator: discipline, social interaction, notation, multi-media and critique. Architects have traditionally played down the disciplinary knowhow and compound expertise that they have mastered for a long time, and that has shaped the work environment of the studio. With the discovery of their creative bubble by more PR-savvy branches of the economy, architects need to wake up and lay claim to the conceptual tools that they have developed over many decades. False modesty should no longer parade as a virtue.

The 'studio' is a staple of the disciplinary tradition of architecture: it has been sublated into the birth matrix of architectural concepts. As such, historiography has cultivated several myths around these educational spaces. The long-night charrettes in the 19th Century Beaux-Arts studios presented the creative spark as igniting under extreme time pressure, as well as last-minute and late-night adjustments. At the Bauhaus, Johannes Itten gave the act of architectural creation a spiritual if not straight religious inflection by integrating the teaching of colour and form theories with meditation. At Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright gave the notion of the master class a new meaning and intensity by creating a fellowship of acolytes, who were initiated into the visions of the master in conditions of social isolation. It was also with Wright that the boundary between studio and office space became porous, as his legal dispute with the tax office over Wright's claims of tax exemption for benevolent educational institutions proved.

Somewhere around the late 60's, the architectural studio underwent a 'conceptual' turn. This is the time of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's Las Vegas studio at Yale, of John Hejduk's at The Cooper Union – documented in the fascinating account Education of an Architect – and of Cedric Price's at the Architectural Association in London. Among the more idiosyncratic places at the time, at the AA, the studio is said to have

been an intensified cultural incubator and condenser, as Jeff Kipnis points out in his lively description:

"A school awash in sex, drugs, and rock and roll, David Bowie hanging at the bar; flush to a person with experimental hysteria quickened by the visionary projects of Archigram, architecture's answer to the Beatles; galvanized, sort of, by the European action politics of May 1968; intoxicated by the spontaneous American love-urbanism of Woodstock and its shadow, the erotic violence of Altamont; edified by the froth of the rumors of French intellectual thought; drawn to design, to mod and Carnaby Street, and to antidesign, to the swagger of the infinite cities of Yona Friedman and Italy's Superstudio and Archizoom. Anything goes, everything goes. For studio, write a book if you want. Dance or piss your pants if you want. Even draw and make models if you want, long as they are 'with it.' Structure or codes or HVAC? Go to Switzerland." (2001, p. 28)

The post-60's version of the architectural studio unknowingly became the model for the now fashionable 'start-up', 'business incubator' and 'think-tank' spaces that have sprung up over the past decade or two from the venture capital and crowdfunding economies. The specific microclimate of the studio, which has for a long time been the

breeding ground for architectural inventiveness, has been discovered as a novelty by other disciplines as fertilizer for the productive activity of a different kind. Even managers, for whom the telephone handset and ink pen had so far been the only tactile tools to execute the work, have discovered the ease of 'haptic' approaches to problem solving, where chipboard, glue, wood sticks and Lego blocks come to use to help build and illustrate business plans and technical gear alike. Corporations have hired architects as consultants to teach them the ways of bridging the worlds of ideas and of things to advance their concepts. It is in this context that the conceptual separation between the office and the studio has begun to be deconstructed. The organised and hierarchical machine of the corporate office, which had really taken shape in the 50's and had stimulated the imagination of a creator like Jacques Tati, not least for his film Playtime from 1967, has now been substituted by a work environment which is in many ways its opposite: the studio seems like the alchemical 'other' of the corporate office. In the world of office spaces, the unscripted halls of Google Campuses, for instance, have replaced the typology of the office landscape (Bürolandschaft) exemplified in Roche Dinkeloo's Union Carbide Corporation World Headquarters in Danbury, CT.

Because the work environment and methods of the architecture studio have been 'discovered' by the corporate office world, it is opportune to analyse its structure. Indeed, certain features of the post 60's studio environment make it into a specific kind of creative generator.

DISCIPLINE

In the architecture studio, the main concern has been to incrementally redefine the discipline rather than applying already known ideas to new contexts. This is one of the reasons the 'start-up' businesses have been so interested in this model. The studio's relative isolation from the 'real' world has put the focus on conceptual issues over pragmatic ones; it is a place to suspend disbelief by side-tracking the status quo. Where most relevant, the work done in the studio is dedicated to first principles as opposed to perfecting already existing ones: the criteria for the justification and validation of research results thus emerge from the sphere of the studio itself and are not at all times transferable to the world out there. In this sense, the studio makes room for, cultivates and preserves an 'other' kind of thinking – hypothetical thought – which it protects from crippling aggressions from the expectations of 'accountability' in the real world in the first phases of emergence. Within the terminology of venture capital financing, all products of the studio belong to the 'Series A' round.

Among those architect-teachers who left a lasting influence on the definition of the studio, Oswald Mathias Ungers had insisted that architectural research should set forward themes that emanate from the discipline of architecture itself, and, this way, avoid getting side-tracked by issues that are external to it. As such, all sociological, political and economical issues had to be bracketed out from the research at first, precisely so that architecture would be able to develop its own contribution to those same questions – one that is internal to its own being. For

example, in this context, the discipline of architecture was said to have its proper devices of 'assimilating' contexts: the morphological techniques of both architecture and urbanism have an internal facility to assimilate existing data and, in a further step, to 'transform' it into new syntheses. If architecture was to be a fundamental protagonist in the interdisciplinary, cultural dialogue with other domains of expertise, it had to insist on its proper methods and ideologies. In this process, it succumbs to the studio to be the protective bubble to create an atmosphere within which these themes can mature: "Keep out – Work in progress."

SOCIAL INTERACTION

*Another defining quality of the architectural studio are the unscripted protocols of social interaction it has fostered; the studio has always been an open space shared by many people who work on individual projects, yet have overlapping interests. The kind of ideas bred in its context have thus gestated on the petri dish of social discourse: they are cultural and political at their core, and they cause subtle but constant shifts of discourse. In the mid-60's, Cedric Price had theorized specifically creative communities of learning in extendable networked spaces, not least in his Potteries Thinkbelt project. These new spaces of learning were a critique of the traditional university system, but equally of the corporate office environment. The ways ideas got floated in these spaces are akin to the notion of *dérive*; because they can evolve in non-linear ways, certain distractions from focused work are consciously encouraged. Unlike the corporate office, the architecture*

studio is a space for structured intellectual work, but simultaneously a modelling workshop, crit space, photo studio, party space, dining room, playroom and dorm room. It's 'trans-disciplinary' physiognomy has been emulated by the contemporary think tank spaces, which advertise their ability to create so-called Work/Life balance, and where work spaces start to resemble living rooms or playgrounds. Of course, the scripting of those spaces as those nonchalant environments risks to undo the core idea. In the sense Clement Greenberg had defined a kitsch artefact as one which appropriates the effects but not the processes of an art form (Greenberg, 1939), most institutionalised versions of start-up spaces (for example, administration-financed incubators) are kitsch versions of the architecture studio.

NOTATION

Besides the production of discourse, the architectural studio has emphasised 'notation' as another one of its principal products. The Oxford dictionary defines a notation as "a series or system of written symbols used to represent numbers, amounts, or elements in something such as music or mathematics" (n.d.). In architecture, Bernard Tschumi's Manhattan Transcripts, Daniel Libeskind's Micromegas and Peter Eisenman's diagrams are perfect illustrations of such notations: they translate concepts and percepts into graphic or spatial systems. They are, as such, the first and often quite straightforward physical instantiation of ideas: Tschumi transcribed events into a spatial syntax; Libeskind unravelled the spatial tectonics of musical harmony; and Eisenman superposed conditions of ideality with the devious or the digressive.

These notations tend to be so abstract that their use is at first restricted to the sphere of the studio; only several steps of interpretation and translation turn them into practical instruments to impinge on the 'real' world. The studio's product is not scalable as usually is the research outcome of a start-up lab, but it remains closer to fundamental research. In this sense, the architectural studio has cultivated a strategic distance from the real. This fact is moreover one of the reasons for the divide between practice and theory that has determined many aspects of the discipline of architecture in the last half-century.

MULTI-MEDIA

Architectural studios have always mixed texts, images and physical artefacts in imaginative ways, but with the addition of the new media based on audio, animation, video, modelling and interactive digital simulations, the architect's environments have increasingly turned into multimedia platforms. This would be a less distinguishing feature to set it off from other types of contemporary creative spaces if it wasn't for its particularly substantial range of media being used – from the most physical and concrete to the most virtual and abstract. This fact is like a contemporary rebirth of architecture as the 'mother of the arts': The work in the studio involves firing the laser cutter and 3D plotter, reading a Heidegger book, moulding clay, painting a canvas and testing a model in augmented reality environments – these activities all happen in the same space. Beyond the variability of the kind of work performed, it also involves a particular mindset: architects are trained to take serendipitous interferences between

these diverse media seriously and to not have a set ideology to filter them out as incompatible, unlikely, impossible or absurd.

Historically, it is difficult to deny the recurring interest generations of architects have had in the 'alchemical' combinatory possibilities offered by Surrealism, from Dalí, to Magritte, to Breton and to Bataille; Surrealist art has hinged precisely on the hyper-realistic representation of the impossible, the implausible and the absurd. The studio has thus allowed architects to create their own kind of interdisciplinarity which will ultimately remain impenetrable to external observers.

CRITIQUE

Finally, 'critique' and 'criticism' are integral parts of the studio space and permanent companions of studio life. Nothing in the studio can abide in the absence of critique because every one of its products exists as critique: criticism is one of the key motors of creativity understood as a transformative conceptual energy. Moreover, critiques, reviews, and juries constitute the temporal structure of the studio. Unwritten studio rules request the designer's justification and exegetic arguments facing alternatively internal and external jurors from all across the ideological spectrum.

An open mind is a prerequisite of critique; and as the methodical practice of doubt and the activation of the faculty of judgment, critique does not beg to produce ideological acolytes nor to produce the 'right' answers to set problems, but to define the creative person as a singularity and an individuality. And so, critique

is not foremost aimed at resolving any pragmatic issues nor at settling the question of the use value of an argument, but at teasing out from the mind of the individual creator ever more refined, sharp and idiosyncratic concepts and discursive positions. This procedure is largely useless to the context of the patriarchal hierarchy of the corporate office as defined above; here all criticism is aimed at making a final decision about how resources are going to be channelled. However, even the qualities of singularity and individuality have become a cultural asset within the environment of the 'new economy': start-ups want to be perceived as choosing idiosyncratic solutions. How central a position critique occupies in studios in schools of architecture is an unfailing index of the quality of that school.

Architects have traditionally played down the disciplinary knowhow and compound expertise that they have mastered for a long time, and that has shaped the work environment of the studio. Or else, they have somehow thoroughly internalized their work methods to the point that they are not sufficiently conscious of their singular peculiarities and remarkable potential.

With the discovery of architects' creative bubble by more PR-savvy branches of the economies than ours, architects need to wake up and lay claim to the conceptual tools that they have developed over many decades. False modesty should no longer parade as a virtue. It is not without reason that we come across 'process' and 'system architects' in the IT sector, or 'logistics' and 'solution architects' in the transport and trade sectors: not only have these fields learned to capitalise on the iconic designation of

the generalist/critical/political master conceiver; in a world where everything is turned into a marketing concept, they have now also laid hands on the central creative-social sphere of the studio. If the absorption of the tools of our profession does only rarely help them to really booster their creativity, they too often manage to sell our artistic apparatus as a new-and-coming way of organising the office environment. 

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