

# CURATING SCHOOL CULTURES: STUDIOS IN THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOL AGENDAS

**ANTHONY BURKE**  
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY

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## Abstract

Studios are consistently assumed to be the focus of Architectural education. This paper proposes alternatively, that the success of any studio is fundamentally determined by the explicit design of the context in which it sits. What remains little examined within studio pedagogic discussion is the design of the culture of studios at individual schools and the role, positive and negative of larger school agendas within that shape meaningful studio outcomes. Rather than ask how does one design a studio, a better question might be how does one design the research environment in which they thrive?

This paper interrogates the assumptions of studio independence and posits the positive relationship between designed and curated school cultures and studios as a means of repositioning the debate around studio education.

This raises many issues for currently accepted studio practice which include; assessing the value of individual intellectual property structurally embedded within current studio models, the role of heads of programs as skilled curators, the coherency of a school of architecture and the subsequent capacity for commitment to common research goals, the scale of the current studio model against research potentials, the positioning of schools within a competitive education market place, and the role of specific school agendas and positioning in the context of notions of generalized architectural education.

Within the context of the contemporary education system, there are many reasons why the typical studio model has been so resilient, however, larger agendas requiring change in educational structures and focus is one action with the potential to drive the evolution of studios in a design research context beyond the limits of current boutique project development.

What then is the relationship between a school agenda and the success of studio projects? By examining two contemporary school models (Columbia University's studio X, and the UTS "all school"

Metropolis project) as a starting point, and drawing on conversations developed initially at the international conference “20/20 The Evolving Architectural Education; Innovation in Teaching and learning in Asia” conference hosted in 2012 at CUHK around the importance of cultural activation within Architecture Schools, this paper draws out the relationship between an overall explicit school positioning or agenda, and the success of studio culture within those schools where this is clear.

### Curating School Cultures; Studios in the context of School Agendas

Studios are consistently assumed to be the focus of Architectural education. This paper proposes alternatively, that the success of any studio is fundamentally determined by the explicit design of the context in which it sits. What remains little examined within studio pedagogic discussion is the design of the culture of studios at individual schools and the role, positive and negative of larger school agendas within that shape meaningful studio outcomes. Rather than ask how does one design a studio, a better question might be how does one design the research environment in which they thrive?

Studios have formed the center of architecture education since the formalization of architecture as distinct from building. As Aureli reminds us, Architecture schools were initially if anything, a political instrument formed as a means of creating consensus on what architectural style was. At the core of this political project of conformity to an accepted disciplinary mode, studios or drawing ateliers were the means of instructing, education or indoctrinating classes of students into a state sanctioned version of architecture as it emerged in 1671 in the Academie Royale d'Architecture, established by Louise the XIV's minister of finance, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, articulating architecture as a discipline distinct from building.<sup>1</sup>

Today, the studio is still, by far, the dominant core of architectural education, and perhaps the one area that is equally supported by stringent accreditation demands on courses, and supported universally by the academics and practitioners that teach. So universal is the studio as an agreed education model for architecture, it is the one meeting place where professionals, academics and legislation agree to agree about architecture.

However the studio model has from its origins also maintained its role as a means of conforming students to an agreed notion of architecture, perhaps no longer based in a state sanctioned style, but certainly as a means of celebrating individuality, both to the advantage of academics who benefit from being popular elective studio choices, to students who wish to align themselves with individual instructors whether they are academics or practitioners. The typical context of studio cultures in schools of architecture remains competitive, boutique and focused on individuality.

Current advanced studio models rely on the twin modes of boutique “uniqueness” and difference as a selling point within schools and also between schools. Yet this model that promotes the distinguished designer has little or no relation to a school culture and the context in which studios sit are typically ad hoc arrangements of guest and full time academics that have good individual teaching records and availability, and more or less satisfy the needs of a generalized notion of the graduate architect. Whether they are in a selective /options studio context or not, students are still typically expected to develop through increasing complexity of projects, still based around typological programs.

In the context of the contemporary expectations of research within AQF level 9 Masters degrees, not to mention the pressures of research for staff, the limitations of this version of individual studio cells of around 12 students working on a project set by the instructor and usually changing from year to year are clear, and reinforce a type of graduate architect that is arguably completely ill equipped to work in a research or professional context after graduation.

The contexts of schools of architecture has also changed dramatically in the last two decades creating what might be described as, a sense of disciplinary anxiety, “only exacerbated by the much discussed realization that if the problems of last century were able to be addressed through architecture, by and large the problems of this century are not, at least in the terms of a 20th Century understanding of the figure of the architect.”<sup>2</sup>

Pressures from funding, changing expectations of graduate skills, and much talked about disciplinary and practice changes are all pressures on the traditional studio model. However the anxiety is only exacerbated by the notion that a studio is an independent academic unit, with a unique method, social/cultural environment, and

project form. In this sense, the context of schools of architecture in which studios sit, are rarely explicitly curated, and are typically only administratively balanced as a result ultimately of offering an appropriate spread of skills to satisfy school accreditation demands.

What alternative types of context can be created for studios? What if the studio was not an island in a school, but if the school itself was considered the project? Quite separately from the question of school marketing and identity which are beyond the scope of this paper, the scale of the studio to tackle the complexity of problems and environments that architecture must currently face seems totally inadequate, and the scale of the school, mobilizing a whole context within which a studio might operate as a part of an agreed agenda offers much potential while challenging accepted wisdom of the boutique studio model.

Approaching the role of studios as part of a curated and explicit school agenda over a period of time challenges the concept of a broad graduate skill base in favor of a narrow focus on topics. It puts the agenda of the school ahead of the agenda of individual research or teaching positions, and allows one studio to leverage off others, as well as off other subjects in a coordinated way such that a robust school conversation can be engaged at many levels within the school and across typically distinct discipline areas such as construction, theory and design. The value of this approach is in assuming that the outcomes of the studios can be effectively put into the service of a larger school project and literally projected into other more public spaces of debate.

This idea however also raises many issues for currently accepted studio practice. These include; assessing the value of individual intellectual property structurally embedded within current studio models, the development of the role of heads of programs as skilled curators rather than administrators, the coherency of a school of architecture and the subsequent capacity for commitment to common research goals, the logistics of scale of the current studio model against research potentials, the positioning of schools within a competitive education market place, and the role of specific school agendas and positioning in the context of notions of generalized architectural education.

The Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation launched their StudioX program in 2008, as an experimental strategy to increase the capacity of a school to address substantial research contexts through a structural reorganization and networked strategy. Trading on the brand name of Columbia's GSAPP, the school has tested a pilot StudioX venue in NY in 2008 lead by the high profile Geoff Manaugh of BldBlog before franchising that model to other international destinations. While there is much skepticism of the strategy as a marketing initiative and a kind of brand colonialisation, (like the AA summer school program), the ambitions of the StudioX project towards creating a unique and broad context for a series of parallel studio, event and exhibition situations does offer both a potential scaling effect beyond individual studios while embedding a curatorial program, that of the question of cities, primarily within a broad and enduring collection of spaces for multiple events, including studios. The StudioX model is labeled as a series of "advanced laboratories for exploring the future of cities"<sup>3</sup> at once claiming the scale of the project, its projective nature and the focus of the networks research.

Interestingly a core component of the Studio X model is the tempering of individual studio works not as the center of attention for this project, but as one of a series of elements being drawn together that aim to engage a broadly understood audience for the work on an ongoing basis, through talks, visits, exhibitions, libraries, provision of resources and a stated ambition to invite in other institutions and instructors to join the project. Within the GSAPP's stated ambition to "establish the most decisive global network of teaching, research and communication about the build environment."<sup>4</sup> Tempering this marketing hubris, is the recognition that the issue at hand, the future of cities, is beyond traditional studio contexts to manage, and that schools need to change in order to address these larger architectural contexts. Also embedded in the project is the recognition that the centers of the North American and European academies, are no longer well placed to engage with these large scale problems directly. In a world of global ambitions, the virtue of being local is evident, and in this sense the project of the StudioX is to learn from the locals, summed up in the words of Dean Mark Wigley, "Schools need to become students."<sup>5</sup>

The studio in this model is no longer central. Rather the offering extends to a book gallery, global interface, gallery, lecture space, work space, meeting room, offices, coffee bar which all amount to a studio-X model. In this regard the StudioX model is similar to the creative spaces offering of the City of Sydney Oxford Street and William street creative hubs program which launched in 2011.<sup>6</sup>

The other aspect of the studio network model that is unique to the GSAPP offering is the scale of their global footprint. This is a clever tie in to their alumni networks, and a way to leverage their brand well beyond New York, where it has been historically synonymous. The strategy is not available to all schools as the set up costs and management of the network are resource intensive however, the ambition to collectivise the project of research in cities through a network of spaces rather than traditional studios per se, offers a glimpse of the potential of this new school context within which large scale research can occur.

At the University of Technology, Sydney, after much discussion on the changing role of practice in architecture after the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale, *Formations*, exhibition, a decision was made to soft launch and *all school* project, the "Sydney Metropolis" project. The aims of the project are three fold, to develop a strongly articulated local expertise in Sydney as a case study for contemporary issues in metropolitan development in Australia, to engage within the current Sydney metropolitan and development debates not as an objective institution, but as a biased protagonist, and to explore the potentials of rallying a small core faculty and adjunct staff around a common project.

The continuous question for the school remains, what are the possibilities of a contemporary school of architecture? Certainly this is another means of addressing the role of research, but also includes issues of advocacy, the possibility of institutional generosity, and acknowledging and taking responsibility for a role as a cultural creator within any metropolitan context. These aims for a school also require a context of curatorial leadership and willingness for political engagement with the context of the school, as much as the formulation and development of political skills within the school itself. This political context of a project then serves to direct the studio offerings along with offerings from all subject areas to participate in something larger.

There are some immediate virtues to this model. The relationship of subject to subject falls not within a heterogeneous model of architectural education, but are instrumentalised within a contiguous thematic project, thus foregrounding the integration of architectural skills that are within but also beyond design studio as a central aspect of architectural intelligence and indeed one's education. Another virtue is the capacity to develop a critical foundation for discussion across studio contexts. This allows for the development of positions within the school to be tested external to individual studio contexts, while activating other forums within the school that benefit from a common ground of knowledge.

The negatives to this approach are more related to the typical cultures of architectural education and the challenges for developing buy in from the academic staff typically used to running their own show. In reorienting an academic studio to address or at least respond to an overarching agenda, requires some level of re-crafting a studio that may already be seen to be running well which in turn requires a change in the leadership role from one of colleague/administrator, to one of overt curatorial leadership.

The school of Architecture at UTS is trialing this technique in 2013. By engaging with this question, positions around the argument may be made, and staff and students are able to speak across common theoretical, practice and design territories. Perhaps of most value, in the context of developing research, the value of the school is made explicit to external entities, such as the City of Sydney, or the State Government Architects office for example that allow the students and staff to make meaningful contributions to debates of a larger order. Additionally, subjects usually held apart from one another are all seen to contribute to a common cause, which pedagogically seams the discipline areas of the school into common and complex project understanding. Ultimately the school of architecture must then not only be a place where a conversation can take place, but must articulate a position within that debate. A school can no longer be understood as neutral territory.

## Endnotes

- 1 Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, (The MIT Press, Boston Mass) 2011, p150
- 2 Anthony Burke, "Editorial" in *Learning Curves, NSW Architecture Bulletin*, Nov-Dec, 2011, p3
- 3 GSAPP course information package, "initiatives" brochure, 2012, p6
- 4 GSAPP course information package, "initiatives" brochure, 2012, p5
- 5 GSAPP course information package, "initiatives" brochure, 2012, p3
- 6 [www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/business/city-spaces/creative-hubs](http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/business/city-spaces/creative-hubs), accessed 14.08.13

## Biography

Head of the School of Architecture at UTS, and Professor of Architecture, Anthony Burke is a leading figure in Australian architecture, specialising in contemporary design and theory in relation to technology and its implications for the built environment. A graduate from Columbia University (MS AAD, 2000) and a Bachelor of Architecture from UNSW (B.Arch, Hons 1, 1996), Anthony has lectured extensively in Australia, North America and Asia, including institutions such as University of California, Berkeley, the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Princeton University, Carnegie Mellon University and The California College of the Arts (CCA), Shenzhen University, Tongji University, Hong Kong University and Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Poznan Academy of Fine Arts.

Anthony is an internationally recognised designer, curator and architectural theorist, and sits on a number of urban and architectural advisory panels, and recently was elected to chair the board of the Object: Australian Design Centre. Anthony was selected as co-creative director for the 2012 Australian Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale, and spoke as one of the 2012 TEDx Sydney presenters. His designs have been exhibited internationally and he has published books on Architecture and media, networks and practice.

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