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Research Paper



Architecture Studio Culture: an Evolving Education

Abstract

Ethnographic Research was conducted on the U of I campus to look more in depth at the School of Architecture design “studio culture” and what impact this has on students in the program. Studio culture across the country is changing in response to mandated policy changes, concerns over the health and well-being of students, and the necessity for programs to adapt to a modern campus and more universal education. These mandated policies in schools are being promoted by administration; however their effectiveness is in question. These changes are analyzed against the role that administration and students play in the formation of positive and negative or dangerous studio culture practices.

Hours were spent observing and documenting (in combination with three years of personal experience in architecture design school) studio culture at the School of Architecture through visiting design studios and documenting activities, people, and artifacts found in the space. Interviews were also conducted with students with experience in studio and studio culture to obtain a more personal view into studio culture. Other sources include articles written by NAAB (National Architectural Accreditation Board), the association in charge of certifying the architecture programs at all universities in the United States, as well as articles and passages from professionals and educators regarding the importance of studio culture in schools. Research concluded that creating a positive change in design studio and studio culture is a necessity and the only way this can be achieved is through the active participation and cooperation between students and administration to maintain a challenging, progressive, and safe learning environment.

What is design studio/ “studio culture?”

The concept of studio culture is at the heart of architecture programs in universities around the world. Students take many core classes that prepare them in technical subjects and educate them in professional practice; however, the main focus for students during the studies is the design studio. Studio requires students to sketch, draw, design, plan, problem solve, and construct models. The projects are meant to challenge students and push them out of their comfort zone in order to instill a work ethic, dedication to their own work, and a continued development and growth.

According to students in Architecture:

“Studio Culture is the unique environment that forms as a result of students collaborating, creating, and learning with each other.”

(Arch. Student #1)

“Studio Culture is composed of the rather complex social and professional relationships that develop between students and professors (mostly students) during design studios.”

(Arch. Student #3)

The studio space is a key component to the design process. Students must be comfortable provided with ample work space. Students are given desk space, typically in a larger room, perhaps with students from other years and experience levels. This environment is meant to foster interaction, communication of ideas, and greater creativity, ultimately leading to stronger projects. However, the process of completing these projects is notorious for causing students to work extreme amounts of hours often leading to lack of sleep on a consistent basis and a negation of personal nutrition and (unfortunately sometimes) hygiene; not just a night or two before a deadline, but consistently. Research is being done to discover whether or not these bad

and sometimes dangerous habits are a result of student driven desire for success, encouraged (perhaps indirectly) by faculty, or both.

In “The Redesign of Studio Culture: a Report of the AIAS Studio Culture Task Force,” the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS) states the positive aspects of studio culture and what it means to students. However, it also begins to look into its intrinsic dangers. Aside from its positive attributes the AIAS taskforce states that “Studio culture can also be characterized by the myths it perpetuates. These myths influence the mentality of students and promote certain behaviors and patterns” (Redesign of Studio Culture 6). From experience and from opinions of students these myths seem to be fairly accurate and suggest that students are influenced by either students that came before them or by misconceptions that are generalized about the kind of work that is expected of them.

Studio Culture Myths:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Architectural education should require personal and physical sacrifice • The creation of architecture should be a solo, artistic struggle • The best students are those who spend the most hours in studio • Design studio courses are more important than other architecture or liberal arts courses • Success in architecture school is only attained by investing all of your energy in studio • It is impossible to be a successful architect unless you excel in the design studio • Students should not have a life outside of architecture school • The best design ideas only come in the middle of the night • Creative energy only comes from the pressure of deadlines | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The best design ideas only come in the middle of the night • Creative energy only comes from the pressure of deadlines • Students must devote themselves to studio in order to belong to the architecture community • Collaboration with other students means giving up the best ideas • It is more important to finish a few extra drawings than sleep or mentally prepare for the design review • It is possible to learn about complex social and cultural issues while spending the majority of time sitting at a studio desk • Students do not have the power to make changes within architecture programs or the design studio |
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(Redesign of Studio Culture 6)

Mandated National Changes

Schools are now required, by NAAB (the National Architecture Accrediting Board) to have an official studio culture policy made public to students. This policy addresses concerns of professionalism, collaboration amongst students, ethical issues, and more. But most importantly it allows programs to hold a mirror up to themselves and address problems of students being worked too hard to the point of endangering their health and preventing a well rounded development as students both academically and socially, within the program and the campus community as a whole.

I am currently a student in the Architecture program and have finished the required undergraduate design studios. This provides for me an outside perspective into a world I dedicated much of my time too, and this ability to step away has shown me the importance of a strong studio culture. Through research and observations I have explored this changing environment and the positive and negative changes that are occurring within studio culture. But the question must be asked: Will a forced policy creation really change the way students participate in their design education or the way faculty and administration approach their instruction and mentoring of students? The quest for an answer to this question will explore studio culture from a top down approach, looking at a progression of scales: from the national level down to the student experience.



Organized Student Action on a National Level

In order to better understand Studio Culture in architecture schools in the US, we must first gain a broader perspective on the current status of Studio Culture around the country. As stated earlier studio culture is integral to a student's education and creates the strongest memories (both good and bad) from which to learn. With the field of architecture evolving due to greater use of computers and technology, so too has Studio Culture in schools. However, the AIAS has observed perhaps a more dangerous trend in schools regarding studio culture and habits of students and professors regarding undue stress, overly-harsh and non-constructive critiquing, unhealthy work/sleep schedules, etc. and how all these things send a message to students as they try to learn how to be a successful professional architect.

The main focus of the study is to analyze the effectiveness of the Studio Culture Initiative put forth by the NAAB (as mentioned earlier). The analysis of the Initiative discusses best practices and recommendations for policy creation, and provides thoughts on the future of Studio Culture and ways to improve the education of future professionals. The Studio Culture Initiative was a policy pushed by NAAB stating that schools must create an official Studio Culture policy and post it publicly for students to see. This policy addresses the atmosphere that should surround studio and attitudes students should have towards their work and peers. Both NAAB and AIAS feared that professors as well as students began to encourage unhealthy practices regarding amounts of work and sacrifices made academically and socially. The new Studio Culture policy should promote collaboration, dedication to one's work, desire to learn and improve, as well as remaining a well rounded student and person. (Toward an Evolution of Studio Culture 5)

Significant findings from the survey showed many telling, although expected, facts regarding the dangerous trends that were occurring in architecture schools. Almost all responders stated that the NAAB requirement was the reason for their respective schools drafting an official Studio Culture policy. Most were created between 2005 and 2007 and had an authorship period of less than one year. Administrators also stated, in a strong majority, that the new Studio Culture policy created a more supportive atmosphere for students and cite positive improvements in the program. However, on a negative note, administrators observed that many policies do not lend themselves to gauging success of the initiative and do not have specific guidelines for students and faculty to improve the existing Studio Culture conditions. (9-18)

In order to prevent only biased answers from school administrators the taskforce also surveyed hundreds of AIAS chapter leaders from schools across the country, in order to gain a student perspective on the effectiveness of the Studio Culture Policy Initiative. These results proved to be less positive and are perhaps more representative of the current state of schools' Studio Cultures. Fewer students (compared to administrators) stated that their school had a Studio Culture policy, suggesting that perhaps policies were not made public enough to students or not stressed by faculty as an important part of the studio experience. Half of the student responders stated that there were not student feedback opportunities in the creation of a Studio Culture Policy, or that student inclusion in the creation of the policy was poor. (19-24)

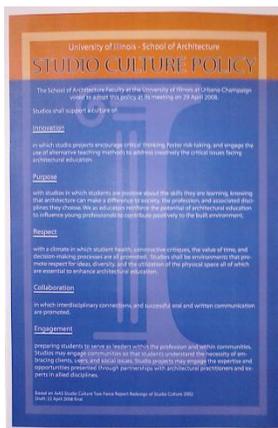
Aside from surveys the task force provides suggestions for creating a successful Studio Culture Policy. Some key points are that Studio Culture narratives should have a much bigger role in studio environments and address concerns of students being well-rounded and involved in their architecture school and larger campus as a whole. A greater public awareness would

ensure that faculty adhere to the goals and mission of the school, and would help students by stating objectives and expectations as well as their rights as a student in a unique and demanding environment. (27, 28)

▼ Changes at Illinois

The University of Illinois - School of Architecture was really no different from other schools in its process of adopting a studio culture policy. An official policy was drafted on April 22, 2008 and was adopted a week later on April 29. This is years after the NAAB requirement and came about prior to the schools renewal of accreditation that occurred in 2009 and happens every six years. (arch.illinois.edu)

On the surface, the school appears to be very proactive in broadcasting its studio culture policy to its students. Signs appear scattered around the different architecture buildings and throughout studio spaces. They are small signs, with the traditional orange and blue and block-I. Listed on each sign are values and explanations that the school wishes to be present in every studio environment.



Studios shall support a culture of

Innovation

in which studio projects encourage critical thinking, foster risk-taking, and engage the use of alternative teaching methods to address creatively the critical issues facing architectural education.

Purpose

with studios in which students are positive about the skills they are learning, knowing that architecture can make a difference to society, the profession, and associated disciplines they choose. We as educators reinforce the potential of architectural education to influence young professionals to contribute positively to the built environment.

Respect

with a climate in which student health, constructive critiques, the value of time, and decision-making processes are all promoted. Studios shall be environments that promote respect for ideas, diversity, and the utilization of the physical space all of which are essential to enhance architectural education.

Collaboration

in which interdisciplinary connections, and successful oral and written communication are promoted..

Engagement

preparing students to serve as leaders within the profession and within communities. Studios may engage communities so that students understand the necessity of embracing clients, users, and social issues. Studio projects may engage the expertise and opportunities presented through partnerships with architectural practitioners and experts in allied disciplines.

(arch.illinois.edu)

Other methods appeared to be used in order to both inform students about the importance of the studio culture policy, and create a forum for student input into the formation of the official studio culture policy. In the main lobby of the Architecture building, a large sign was put on the wall stating that students were invited to write down suggestions they had to make studio safer, more comfortable, and an overall better learning environment. Response was strong and students seemed interested in participating. The overwhelming consensus on the poster was that students wanted better conditions in the computer lab (room temperature control, more computers, more workspace, etc.) and a lounge with seating for students to take a break from their work. It will be interesting to see how the administration will take these valid requests into

consideration as they plan for the next school year. And while this seems to be too much after the fact, certainly the process of reform and student involvement must start somewhere.

While these efforts by the school appear to be positive, the consensus of students from a small number of interviews seems to be that while signs are posted and they are aware of the policy's existence, they are not certain what the policy contains in detail, nor do their professors seem to stress or discuss the official studio culture policy and how it should apply to design studio and the work that the students produce.

"I am aware of the studio culture policy, the signs are posted all around studio, but to tell you the truth I haven't really taken the time to read it or know what it's all about."

(Arch. Student #1)

"I can honestly say that I don't know the policy and the policy has never been stressed to me."

(Arch. Student #2)

☞ A day in the Life

To gain a better perspective of architecture studio culture, I spent the afternoon observing a senior design studio that was undergoing their final reviews. As I am an architecture student I have been through this process many times, but this is my first experience being an outside observer. I am not currently enrolled in a design studio this semester and being away from the culture and then going back into it and talking to friends and observing the daily activities has given me a more neutral perspective into studio culture and how it is evolving. The account of the day's events is given below with a *running commentary* in *italics* discussing these events' significance within the evolution or implementation of a healthy studio culture.

(12:52 pm) I arrived at the studio. Students were busy pinning up their final drawings boards. They were working together in groups of two which implies that each project was a group project. Each team had a total of four 20" x 20" drawing boards. Three groups arranged them horizontally while one group arranged them in a square layout. The walls in the studio space were completely covered with previous drawings done by the groups. While it was a little distracting, it was interesting to be able to reference back to old drawings during presentations in order to see the design process behind each project.



The general vibe in the room was that students were calm and prepared for their final critique given by their professor and two guest reviewers. After setting up projects, many sat around chatting waiting for the reviews to begin. It was clear that several of the students had spent most, if not all of the night, working on their final presentations.

Pulling an "all-nighter" is definitely a common occurrence in architecture school and it is something that new studio culture policy is trying to limit as much as possible, as it is not a healthy lifestyle or work habit. From experience and talking with students, some all-nighters are the result of students leaving work until the last minute, while others consistently have all-nighters due to weekly checkpoint submittals and an individual drive to further one's own design.

Before the critiques began, the teams quickly taped up large title blocks underneath the boards. Each one contained a large U of I “block-I” and the teammates names listed. This may seem reasonable to the outside observer, but to the members of this studio group, this was something that was really funny to them. It appeared to be some running inside joke, and immediately following the arrival of their professor I realized this was true. Upon seeing them he instantly told everyone that they had to remove the signs within 5 seconds or they would all get lower grades. He was definitely going along with the joke, but you could tell there was a sense of sincere dislike in his voice. He later described this to a guest reviewer and explained that when he first arrived as a professor at the U of I several years ago, many architecture students would put large title blocks that would take up most of their boards and were obnoxiously more noticeable than all the drawings.

I think this interchange demonstrated a strong and positive relationship between the students and their design professor. A good rapport between students and a professor is definitely a must in a design studio setting. Professors push students and help guide them through the design process, and the ability to speak openly and share ideas both ways can only strengthen “studio culture” and design education.

The project reviews went well for the most part. Instead of each group presenting, the reviewers looked in detail at the drawings and then asked questions and voiced any concerns or suggestions. Each project is going to be entered in a nation-wide steel design competition; however, the projects covered a wide range of building or structure types. A very interesting aspect of the critiques was that the reviewers and professor used pencils and drew and wrote notes all over the final presentation drawings. They did this to make layout suggestions and other drawing changes.

I think these reviews demonstrated a positive studio culture trend. While negative comments were made, the reviewers seemed impressed with the amount of work students put into the projects and provided many constructive comments, knowing that no project will ever be perfect or fully complete. One guest implied he could have been a lot harsher with his reviews, suggesting that he perhaps preferred some of the older studio culture trends.

(2:24 pm) Reviews ended at this time, and next I observed the studio space. Present were several posters showing the University of Illinois School of Architecture “Studio Culture Policy.” These were placed various walls and doors throughout the studio, hallways, computer lab, and entry. Also present were signs demonstrating recycling practices within studio: Paper, Model Materials, Bottles and Cans, and Trash with corresponding signs on the appropriate receptacles.

Students from other studio sections were also present in the space working on their respective projects and discussing various things, all adding to the atmosphere.



(5:30 pm) Later that day, the architecture program hosted the husband and wife architect team of LevenBetts Architects from New York who gave a presentation discussing many of the projects they have done over the years. Students and professors gathered in the atrium of Temple Hoyne Buell Hall for snacks and refreshments. Conversations were carried until the start of the lecture. In the large lecture hall, it was clear that not many students were present. This is unfortunate as it was a very interesting lecture. The architects gave an in depth look into several of their projects and provided a look into their design process.

It is clear that the collection of the day's events: "studio culture policy," design critiques, regular studio work time, and visiting lectures, are elements that make up Studio Culture. Studio Culture is both a system of respect, healthy dedication, learning, and progression, and a community of students and faculty. Active participation or lack thereof, by both students and faculty, in the day to day events of the school is what makes or takes away from the overall atmosphere of the architecture program as it tries to fully immerse students in the world of design.



Student Opinion and Who's to Blame

While the events depicted in the "day in the life" account demonstrate what appears to be a positive studio environment, students in that section as well as others will certainly agree that not every professor is the same. Workloads vary and frequency of production and critiques can be very overwhelming and require a lot of sacrifices physically, socially, and academically. But who exactly is to blame? This is still unclear. NAAB operated under the assumption that the institutions promoted unhealthy amounts of work through its studio projects. However, the student factor must certainly come into play.

Students in a design program such as architecture know the demands of the program they are entering. At top schools competition is certainly high and students that want to excel are self-motivated and will push themselves above and beyond what is expected of them (and sometimes their own limits) in order to achieve success. This in combination with the fact that architectural design projects are a never-ending process brings about the possibility of constant work for students. Designs are never final, even those on final presentation boards can still be developed, changed, and improved. Students have an end goal, but depending on their work

ethic, they can put in extreme amounts of work while developing a single design until they arrive at a final design simply because they ran out of time.

"I spend anywhere from fifty to seventy hours in studio a week outside of scheduled studio time...
I think that the amount of work in studio is mostly what you make of it. The only reason I spend so much time in studio is because I want to, there are plenty of people who can do what they want in much less time with much less work."

(Arch. Student #2)

"It [Studio work load] is fair. It pushes you to the limit and expects you to give your heart to the projects that you work on and to the profession that you are entering. Because architecture is not only a profession it is a lifestyle."

(Arch. Student #4)

So students are the problem... right? Not necessarily. Students must gain these preconceived notions regarding architecture design school from somewhere. This is where the AIAS studio culture myths really seem to come in to play. They enter into the design world with no experience in how the studio environment works, and are immediately thrown into a demanding series of design projects. And while being thrown into the deep end (for lack of a better phrase) and working your way out is a big learning and problem solving milestone, students are taught early on (perhaps indirectly or unintentionally) poor time management skills and lose sight of maintaining a well-rounded academic and personal life.

The AIAS Studio Culture Task Force states that:

"Architectural education should be challenging, rigorous, and time-consuming. However, as one noted practitioner stated, "If we want professionals to lead balanced, healthy lives, we should not expect them to put off practicing that mindset until later in life." Do our current practices promote successful habits? Is too much focus placed on the time spent in the design studio? Despite the difficulty of these questions, the answers must be sought and considered. The consequences of not doing so have been fatal."

(Redesign of Studio Culture 7)

A current student adds:

"...even professors who encourage you to sleep and take care of yourself before completing work still require the same amount of work load [compared to those to don't explicitly encourage his] which doesn't always leave time for such activities."

(Arch. Student #1)

Brad Lunz, former South Quadrant Director of the AIAS, believes that both faculty *and* students are to blame. He states: “Many students place this burden on the faculty. It is not only the faculty to blame but the students as well. We simply do not value our time. The AIAS can take a very proactive role in initiating a time management program” (Lunz). This idea seems to be in line with the mixed feelings that both the interviewed students expressed and that the AIAS Studio Culture Task Force demonstrates with its list of student myths and unhealthy administrative practices.

So what solutions exist? Some students may want to see more accommodations from administration regarding studio infrastructure and comfort. Introducing lounges and healthy food sources in studios would allow students to be more comfortable and take breaks from their work. This would create a more relaxed social environment for students to interact and share ideas as well as recharge after many hours of working. However, this also creates the propensity for students to simply remain at studio for longer periods of time now that they have the comforts of home readily available to them.

Simply reducing work load or expecting less of students compromises students education as well. Schools would not be successful in pushing students to develop ideas and future practicing architects would not be ready to progress the profession into new heights. Some balance must be struck between time management and the fair dividing of work throughout a semester in order for students to be both challenged and respected.

Thomas Fisher, Dean of the College of Architecture & Landscape Architecture at the University of Minnesota approaches his opinions on the matter from a historical perspective. He



states that the “brow-beating” reviews that occurred in the past are over for the most part as they have no place in a modern university that seeks to create diverse students. Reviewers from other disciplines are often brought to provide multiple perspectives. Students are also (or need to be) rebelling against the norm of studio dominating their life by standing up to abuses and desiring to have a private life or simply take advantage of “the larger social and intellectual offerings of universities” (Fisher).

In order for positive change to occur, administrators must actively analyze the current state of their design studios. Dangerous habits *do* exist in studios as a result of decades of studio developing into an overwhelming force in students’ lives that does not instill in them healthy time management and work habits for their future careers. Just as important, is a passionate and earnest participation from the student body in voicing its concerns and working with administration to really make improvements. Administrators must be open to student feedback and suggestions and the two must coexist and work cooperatively. Only with all of these factors working in unison, will architectural education be able to provide for its students a challenging, productive, and healthy learning environment that prepares future architects to be leaders in an ever-changing profession and world.

Arch. Student #1. E-mail interview. 27 Apr. 2010

Arch. Student #2. E-mail interview. 29 Apr. 2010

Arch. Student #3. E-mail interview. 28 Apr. 2010

Arch. Student #4. E-mail interview. 28 Apr. 2010

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