

Essay: So you want to be an architect...

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So you want to be an architect. But what is it that you're actually working towards becoming? And how will you get there?

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Students starting an architectural education in the UK in 2015 can reasonably expect a progression through the traditional Part 1 and 2 university/practice/university sandwich – a clearly defined interplay between immersive creative exploration and the reality of getting things built. They can, eventually, top this off with a Part 3 garnish – a final spurt of intertwined practice life, site visits and study – after which the title 'architect' can be assumed. Not only does this label act as a quality benchmark, it will make it easier for them to answer the question 'so what do you do?' at parties.

It's fair to expect this because it has been this way since 1958. Many of the students' tutors and employers will have been through the same system. And it's understandable if they bring to it another assumption: that the end-game is to be able to design buildings. But the university/practice formula is changing.



Oxford Brookes and New York Institute of
Technology students working on a live project in
Hackney

For many individuals it has already shifted. RIBA director of education David Gloster has stated that only one in 15 Part 1s go on to registration, but even discounting those who have always dropped out to follow another career, or to work in architecture but not as an architect, there is a growing group for whom economics necessitate a less neatly compartmentalised route. Students may keep working in practice one day a week during Part 2, or make cash on the side using their digital skills to pump out 'artists impressions' for practice clients, or take longer gaps between degrees to save up tuition fees.

The profession will survive, but with its members defining themselves in ever more specialised ways

Now the balance may be transforming at institutional level too. On the one hand, legislation is mobilising itself. An EU directive known as the Bologna agreement means that first years may soon enter a significantly altered programme. These pedagogic pioneers (or guileless guinea pigs) can look forward to qualifying as an architect in six years or fewer without ever leaving campus, as per the continental tradition.

A move towards European parity would doubtless benefit the financially overstretched. However, one concern is that practices might end up providing necessary design education retrospectively if 'studio' time is reduced to squeeze in Part 3 management and law content. Another is that students would miss out on the 'real world' engagement of the year in practice. This could well be mitigated by an increased emphasis on live projects – proto-practical construction projects that are often community-situated, and arguably offer a more meaningful experience. Indeed, it's a frustration of the current system that, in contrast to the USA, live projects cannot already be counted towards the professional experience and development record (PEDR)'s 24 months of practice experience.

On the other hand, new academic models are emerging, driven by the belief that more flexible, affordable and relevant architectural educations are required for the 21st century.



Oxford Brookes and NewYork Institute of Technology students working on a live project in Hackney

The London School of Architecture (LSA), launching in September (*see page 31*), consists of a year of being mentored part-time as a practice employee – the salary offsetting school fees – before joining a self-directed group for second-year thesis work. Students reflect on their time in offices through a critical practice module. A focus over both years on urban studies, and on one London borough as the context for all design work, aims to promote broader, more pragmatic engagement with the diverse forces that shape real places. Practices too stand to gain through LSA's networked approach – participation in inter-practice 'design think-tanks' appears devised to enable them to support student learning while simultaneously securing elusive time and space to pursue their own research interests.

More established is the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT)'s diploma, which, like LSA, is a case study in *Radical Pedagogies*, our recent book on UK architectural education. CAT launched in 2008 following frustration with mainstream syllabuses. For students wanting to think holistically about sustainability, and seeking less of a disconnect between education, practice and site, it offers the opportunity to remain working – and earning – throughout their degree. Students spend just one week a month at CAT on intensive residentials at its site in Powys, Wales, during which emphasis is placed on community projects and hands-on construction experience.

The stress placed by such models on the contribution of both practice and practical experience could be argued to be a return to the roots of UK architectural education, a system that is reliant on pupillage and apprenticeship. Where the above examples fundamentally differ, however, is by retaining the role of the school as self-assured educational facilitator – something almost entirely lacking in the pre-Victorian era – thus avoiding promotion of personality cults and specific associated aesthetics, something of which the current unit system is also often accused.

Where the new models also differ from early initiatives is in an apparent openmindedness towards the outcome of all this learning. While Victorian educators sought to preserve the purity of the architectural discipline, and in the process the elite status – and earning power – of the nascent protected profession, both CAT and LSA seem delightfully unconcerned about this. CAT alumnus Laura Mark – the AJ's digital editor – describes how much of her cohort eschewed traditional practice, choosing to join community-building organisations, work in procurement, or even become circus performers. Similarly, LSA director Will Hunter happily declares that he would be unconcerned if students did not go on to complete the triad and become architects.

CAT and LSA both offer Part 2 only. It remains to be seen how they will adapt to, or indeed act as precedents for a post-Bologna system. Nonetheless, their experimental stance cannot but appear invigorating to those educators and practitioners – ourselves included – who understand architecture as a complex societal act that goes beyond the procurement of discrete structures and spaces.



Students studying at CAT erect a timber structure

In applauding their approach we should, however, be clear that we are not heralding the death of the architect. Current trends suggest the profession will survive, but with its members required to define themselves in ever more specialised ways, asserting value through knowledge of particular building types or technical approaches. But they also suggest that an equally desirable output of a (perhaps abbreviated) architectural education will be practitioners, unconcerned with title, who are able to think creatively and collaboratively, globally and strategically, about the production of space and the way in which people live in it. Graduates will be able to apply their intelligence to the design of a viability formula, a procurement model, a planning policy, a land ownership deed or a collaboration strategy as they are to a building. It is in such areas that creativity, coupled with socially and politically aware thinking, arguably seems most keenly needed.

In a networked globalised world, none of us working in architecture have the ability, beyond a certain scale of project, to draw a conceptual red line around our site any more. So why would we want to draw one around ourselves?

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