

# PLAYING AT ARCHITECTURE

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Bringing unpredictability and urgency of practice to design studio

This paper explores how a design studio prepares senior students for a future as architects through an experiment in design practice simulation.

From the practitioner's viewpoint, architectural research and teaching within the university are most often a separate world to that of architectural practice.

Likewise, architectural practice is often viewed with detachment from an academic position. Large parts of the architectural profession simply see architectural education as a training ground for architects. While it is acknowledged that architectural education is much broader than this, the teaching of architects by instruction and studio role-play remains a principal undertaking in schools of architecture.

In order to examine the studio preparation of students, this paper discusses what happens if some of the unpredictability and urgency of a practice environment are simulated in a studio environment?

The paper documents a fourth year studio project that was structured in the format of a game. The game incorporated multiple physical and time constraints, and uncertainty. The framework of the project, the way it played-out, speculation made, and conclusions that were reached are discussed. The approach is also discussed as a means to develop senior student design confidence and critical ability. In light of the project, relationships between studio and practice are reflected upon. Finally other possible opportunities for future practice simulation teaching are identified.

**Play** *To play is to move about in a lively or unrestrained or capricious manner. It is recreation, amusing yourself with sport or frolic. Play is commonly associated with the spontaneous improvisation and role playing activity of children. It is also to perform, with perhaps a musical instrument or to play out a role in a drama. To play can also be to act as required, to comply with a prescribed set of rules for activity or interaction as with a more serious and restricted form of play - the game. Play is also the word used to describe the free movement or tolerance between two fitted parts of an assembled component.*<sup>1</sup>

So to play at architecture would be to not treat it particularly seriously. Some practitioners might argue that this is what we do in university design studios. Play at designing architecture. In the universities we might argue that it is the practitioners who are playing about, creating architecture that too often displays little of the critical rigor we seek of our student work.

Academic work is fundamentally different to that of architectural practitioners. Academic production is of architectural discourse and research, for which the audience is primarily other academics. Practitioners produce architecture primarily for a general public audience and other practitioners. Universities educate architects and produce architectural research. Practices produce architecture. Student architects eventually leave university graduate and go into practice, and it is at this point of transition that differences between design at university and in practice are apparent to graduate architects and their employers.

**Crossover** Alwyn Boyarsky described the post graduation experience like this *You graduate and you are on a high. Then you get caught up in the routine of the office, the mortgage, children and so on. You have fond memories, but you are feeling ever so slightly resentful... Young graduates either go into big offices, where they do planning studies and their A.A careers seems to get lost, or they strike out on their own, doing conversions and then, if all goes well, bigger things.*<sup>2</sup> Dana Cuff had this to say. *"I was caught off Guard by my early ventures out of the University into the realm of actual architectural practice. What, I kept asking myself, is going on here? I felt as though I had awakened in a foreign culture with a coherent yet invisible system governing its behavior, a system that seemed only vaguely familiar."*<sup>3</sup>

University intentions for the education of students are met via a series of learning modules towards a co-ordinated series of educational objectives. Teaching occurs in a variety of formats including the university design studio where students investigate architectural questions and learn to design in a similar physical context to the practice design studio. There is a perennial argument that students should be prepared more thoroughly for the design of architecture in practice.<sup>4</sup> This argument arises from within the profession and is directed towards bringing a closer match between what is taught at university schools of architecture and what is required of graduates so they can be immediately producing architecture. Some schools of architecture set out to closely align their teaching to the needs of the profession and structure their degree courses to include periods of practical experience in offices as a means to accommodate the professions expectations of graduates<sup>5</sup>.

A counter argument suggests that universities are not technical professional training institutes, they are centres of learning where specialist architectural knowledge is accumulated, advanced and transferred. As Mark Wigley put it *"learn to think through and with the built environment, and architectural discourse becomes a form of intelligence"*<sup>6</sup> In this model graduates emerge with an architectural education that equips them to be architectural thinkers. The position this paper arises from is aligned with the later argument. Graduates learn the professional skills they need to operate in the profession in the period post graduation and beyond, but if they do not have a broad and rigorous design education they are unlikely to gain this from a professional office.

**Differences** Differences between the design studio of the university and the design studio of practice are readily apparent to anyone involved in both realms. For example in practice similar design projects to those set in a university studio have a significantly greater range of external influences, would be completed in less time, to a higher level of resolution, and use shared resources to do so. Architects in practice are comparatively decisive, and work in interactive environments. The economic reality of the commercial world and the insistence of the building industry demand attention. This contrasts to the university studios relative isolation from outside influences, the extended nature of many student investigations over time and the comparative lack of development in student projects. At University students have time to question and reconsider their projects. The premise is that this results in greater project development and depth, but the result is as often a delay in student commitment to a project until the last minute, and a resulting lack of project development and depth.

**Time +** *Architects admit to depending on deadlines as a way of curtailing design deliberations.*

*“Without them, nothing would get done around here. When time gets short, you have to make decisions”.<sup>7</sup> “Studio problems narrow the full range of issues that any architectural project entails, either by selective focus or by schematic treatment. Few studios ever deal with certain issues of practice: changes in the middle of the project...new information learned during the process, conflicts among parties and interests...By nature practice involves an ambiguous, complex situation that undergoes constant change”.<sup>8</sup>*

Wearing my design practitioner hat I speculated could there be an improvement in student critical skills, time management ability, and design ability if some of the insistence of practice could be simulated in a university studio environment? This paper documents the exploration of this question via a fourth year university design project. Practice design conditions that were seen to have potential for simulation in a university studio were

- The relative luxury of time available for most student design projects compared to the economic limits of design time available for professional architects to spend on a project.
- The relative freedom of student projects from the building industries interdependent range of influences, and the stability this affords student projects.<sup>9</sup>
- The singularity of most design work within the university studio where students each work independently on parallel projects.

**GAME** Simulation of practice time and changing conditions was achieved through the format of a game with rules within which students were required to operate. The game combined realistic sites, project conditions, and a competition brief with multiple time constraints and changing requirements over time. The game format was a means to order the complexity of the programmes and introduce the time based moves necessary to achieve the practice time and change simulations.<sup>10</sup>

Four sequential actions to the Game were broken down further into a total of twelve parts that each corresponded to a weeks work. The weekly cycle required twelve sequential hand-ins of work in response to briefings that were revealed and elaborated sequentially over time. The regular submission of work was intended to help students begin to design strategically, with some degree of flexibility or *play* in their design work and to simulate the type of timing, conditions and demands that might arise in an architectural practice situation.<sup>11</sup> Deadlines to other courses were ignored to create additional time limitations beyond the students and tutors control.

The course investigated education architecture through establishing clear architectural and educational positioning, designing, then redesigning a kindergarten to a changed brief, redesigning an existing primary school to a significantly intensified density, and designing a new secondary college. Comprehensive and complex briefs were provided at the beginning of each design project. Each week these were elaborated and changed according to the programme intent, project progress, and needs that had become evident in the previous week. These changes were intended to influence the programme in the manner of a client introduced changes and clarifications in practice.

**INTERPLAY** Some collaborative work was required. This was based on an 'interplay' collaborative work technique developed with a professional colleague for an architectural competition.<sup>12</sup> This process was structured by periodic briefing and exchanges, alternating each students work on a single project as a method to order an equal collaboration. For two weeks a sequential two daily exchange of work with a student colleague occurred, then independent work continued on each others projects. This process of exchange and iteration of work on work continued for seven generations of exchange introducing unpredictable design

inputs into each student's design. Tutorial sessions included peer discussion and reviews that were also part of the assessment process.

**Playing** Playing out of the program over time was resisted by students at the beginning of the programme. The game format contrasted to the way fourth year studio was taught in the alternative studio modules offered in parallel.<sup>13</sup> A trimester workload was spread out over time with the intention of a more evenly distributed workload for students than would usually have been the case. Students initially perceived that this way of working would require a significant amount of additional work - twelve conventional hand-ins instead of one and they approached the first two weeks of the project in the way they would approach any other deadline and hand-in - with little strategic sense of the effort required to maintain the high standards and progress throughout the period of the whole game. Students committed themselves to their design work sooner than would be the case for a conventional studio programme. They had to.

The interplay component of the project began slowly with students showing an initial reluctance to let go of parts of their own work changed by another student working on it. They had been paired strategically in a complimentary manner according to perceived strengths and weaknesses in each other's work. Some students initially resisted the collaborative exchange element of the project. Most embraced the opportunity to improvise and add significantly to their own design work, working with 'chance' elements introduced by others, and adapting and developing them to become part of their own design. As the game progressed students contributed ever more freely and critically, influencing the comparative status of their own work by ensuring a rigorous critique of their peers work.

The final design presentation folios were A3 books between the manner of a visual diary and conventional architectural presentation of drawings describing a project. The series of hand-ins presented a transparency of thinking and representation making the project easy to assess, and providing a full and permanent record of the project.

The play architecture program shortened the time available for students to work on parts of projects as a device to simulate the time limitations of practice. Student work habits changed to meet the projects weekly hand-in structure, and because all of the hand in material was assessed. Students focused on work at hand in relation to what had been done and what was to come. They did not have the luxury of leaving the work to the last minute or rebeginning a

project, because their earlier work had already been handed in for assessment. In the manner of a practice design development students committed to a continuity of thinking and work. The short duration of the project stages worked against an in depth development of the projects. Student knowledge about their progress on the project to date and competing time demands from other courses allowed students to manage their inputs to the programme in a detailed way to match their time availability. In a manner analogous to professional practice work was done at a strategic targeted level to balance conflicting time demands. Even when there was conflicting time demands students still made regular progress and presented development of work each week. This was a significant educational gain in a course that has a major competing course that negatively impacts on student output for several trimester weeks.

The short duration of each of the project 'moves' facilitated the speedy translation of architectural thinking into design proposals. The collaborative interplay where work was sequentially exchanged was a key device that freed students from an insular design environment and required them to react and improvise. This was a real challenge for them. As this component of the work progressed they increasingly embraced the opportunities provided by the unsolicited inputs and alternative investigations of their colleagues. The exchange process gave the opportunity for students to reappraise their own work from an alternative direction initiated by one of their peers. It also allowed each student to work on another different design for the same project.

**Discontinuity** The discontinuity inherent in the interplay process created uncontrollable conditions analogous to those experienced working with a client in practice. Students who used the interplay way of working became more decisive, measured, less precious and more strategic in their design intentions as they progressed. They describe the way of working as *“strange, traumatic, challenging, positive, interesting, and a great method to build up a body of work and test it quickly”*.

The interplay exchange of work as a means to create a shift in thinking and design development was an effective learning technique. Variations of the game could occur to meet particular pedagogical intentions. Time components, the number of players, and the details of projects each player is to work on will have an effect on programme outcomes. A longer period

of mapped exchange of work would create more integrated and developed collaborations simulating the practice situation where architects work on more than one project in parallel.

At their core both practice and university studios design architecture. The 'playing at architecture' university studio effectively simulated time pressures and uncontrollable client inputs and complexities of practice in a student design programme, and students responded in the manner of architects in practice. They actively managed their design efforts according to the program requirements. The process of student exchange of work can be seen as analogous to the way a practicing architect co-ordinates and manipulates the inputs of subconsultants. The immediacy of the weekly hand-ins and feedback for the students is analogous to an architect's schedule of project meetings.

Students learned to pace their productivity. They learnt to deal with dynamic design contexts that they could not completely control. They also learnt a structured means of collaborating with others on a single project. Their *decisiveness, critical ability and design confidence* developed. These are foundational skills for a student to learn within an architecture programme and to have available should they graduate and move into practice. This type of programme could be taught to students in the earlier part of the five year degree course to have even more value. The logical consequence of the focus on rapid design was the sacrifice of design development and this was partially the case with this project but there was also a more efficient student use of time and greater development of the short projects within the time available than would have otherwise been the case.

**So then** what can we say about this programme and its potential as a playful variation to the grunt work of studio teaching? Those of us who are involved for extended periods at the coal face of studio teaching know that it is a slow progressive and often exhausting process somewhat like giving blood. Playing at architecture through this design studio was to ignore the apparent non criticality of much of design in practice and adapt some of its contexts to contribute a setting for critical teaching of design in a University studio anyhow to see what would happen. Although the sample of the students was small and no objective results can be drawn from case studies of the student projects because of relative student abilities it is clear that there is potential to strengthen student design confidence and develop student critical abilities through design praxis as a reflexive form of iterative exploration.



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<sup>1</sup> Conside oxford dictionary p913

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Boyarsky and Peter Salter in conversation. "Eleven A.A. Graduates exhibition 11-25 Feb 1992" *A.A. Files24, Autumn 1992*. p66.

<sup>3</sup> Dana Cuff *Architecture : The Story of Practice* M.I.T Press 1992. p1

<sup>4</sup> For example see letters by Tony Van Raat, John Hunt and Peter Wood *Architecture New Zealand* Nov?Dec 2000 – Sept/Oct 2001.

<sup>5</sup>Unitec School of Architecture requires 700 hours experience in an architectural office as a part of the BArch degree course.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Wigley *NZIA conference presentation* Auckland 26 May 2005

<sup>7</sup> Cuff *Architecture : The Story of Practice* p92.

<sup>8</sup> Cuff *Architecture : The Story of Practice* p90.

<sup>9</sup> Table of Participants in an architectural project, Dana Cuff *Architecture : The Story of Practice* p79.

<sup>10</sup> Luis H Summers *Operational games in architecture and design* JAE No1 Sept 1979 p5 discusses the use of design games in architectural teaching.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Tschumi *Architecture and Transgression* Oppositions July 1976 and in his initial *advertisements for architecture* theorises the pleasure of the architect through rules and limits.

<sup>12</sup> The Colleague was John Verstappen and the competition was the Sarjeant Gallery Competition

<sup>13</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> year Studio programmes at Victoria have for the last seven years been taught in a research based small group parallel programme format. Each of the parallel projects are completed over one trimester. The projects are typically assessed and reviewed at half and full term points.