

Book Review

Smith, C. (ed.) (2021). *Progressive Studio Pedagogy: Examples from Architecture and Allied Design Fields*. London and New York: Routledge. Contributors: Sean Burns, Magda Fourie-Malherbe, Gerhard Griesel, Charlie Smith, Andrew R. Tripp, Anika van Aswegen

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Anyone teaching in the field of architecture, landscape architecture and/or interior architecture and design will be familiar with the two staples of studio teaching: the so-called ‘crit’ or review (which may be formative or summative), and the tutorial (which may be done on an individual basis or in small groups, depending on numbers and resources). Whilst these two modes of teaching have their uses and have proven their efficacy (in replicating aspects of the professional environment students go on to work in, for example), nobody will deny there are challenges facing both the profession and design education today that require us to broaden our repertoire and consider – indeed create – ways and means to address current issues around employability, (in)equality, inclusivity and (academic) literacy. Increasing student numbers and continuing pressure on staff and resources have meant that educators have had to become ever more resourceful in maintaining quality and standards in design education. This makes *Progressive Studio Practice: Examples from Architecture and Allied Design Fields* (2020), edited by Charlie Smith, a particularly welcome addition to the field, as it addresses many of these issues through a discussion of concrete case studies drawn from architecture, landscape and interior design.

The authors are all experts in their field and demonstrate a thorough grasp of the literature relevant to the methods and strategies they propose. The chapters are thematically organised to reflect different aspects and stages of the learning process. Chapter One seeks to theoretically frame design learning as consisting of a ‘composite of skill sets’ that includes verbalisation and other communication skills alongside the predominantly visual or ‘graphic’ skill sets familiar from design practice. The authors here argue that a more holistic understanding of the skills required in practice will promote a self-reflective attitude and help design students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to cope more effectively with the transition to higher education at the start of their studies. Chapter Two discusses some of the benefits that might be had from integrating writing in studio-based learning. Whilst some might consider such a move controversial, it is clear from the evidence presented that small writing tasks, especially where these are not assessed, can both facilitate and bring focus to students’ learning and, more importantly perhaps, make writing less daunting and more versatile as an academic tool. Chapter Three considers the effect of disrupting conventional design learning by moving away from the traditional object-oriented approach to one focused

on the user's perspective. It is argued that this change of viewpoint during the design process can bring about a 'transformative shift' in students' understanding of contexts and highlight the value of a more human-centred approach. Chapter Four is concerned with developing students' understanding of site and ground as inherently malleable and in dialogue with the design of architectural objects. Although the object-oriented approach is not fully abandoned here, or with some apparent difficulty, it is clear that students benefit from a more 'collaborative' thinking that sees the built object and the contextual surroundings as interrelated elements within the design process. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the benefits of peer review and the use of exemplars in helping students to make evaluative judgements about the quality of their work. It is argued that through such opportunities to critique each other's work, students gain a better understanding of how tutors review their work, whilst exemplars also make it possible for students to gain an insight into the assessment process, even if the criteria are not always clear to them. Demystifying assessment remains an important issue in design education and so the value of student involvement and participation can probably not be emphasised enough.

The message that each of the chapters conveys is summed up well in the point made by Howard Gardner, quoted in Chapter One, which states that 'If you want to teach something that's important, there's more than one way to teach it'. And if one thing stands out from this book, it is the renewed importance of diversifying teaching methods so that students can learn in a multitude of 'multimodal' ways, each of which can contribute in their own modest way to making students the creative and critical thinkers and designers we want them to be.

Inevitably, a book comprising chapters by different authors will display a variety – indeed a kaleidoscope – of writing styles, some of which make for more enjoyable reading than others; in particular Tripp's more essayistic style in Chapter Two offers an engaging plea for the role writing might play in design education. There are moments when the book, being a work of pedagogical scholarship, can get a little dry and become jargon-heavy. I found some of the subheadings in Chapter One, such as 'Design knowledge semiotic process', 'Design skill set modal agencies' and terms like 'self-efficacy' to complicate the discourse unnecessarily and difficult to understand. The referencing (of secondary literature) can also at times feel slightly excessive, particularly in the last chapter. As Tripp's contribution shows, it is, and must be, possible for pedagogical research to present ideas without sacrificing readability for scholarly credibility, and one would expect an editor to bear their audience in mind and stress the need for simplicity in the use of language as well.

In terms of scope, the book cannot aim to exhaust the topic, though I wish the book had included a few more case studies to offer additional examples for educators to draw on, adapt or employ in their teaching, especially from outside the Anglo-Saxon context. It will be noted, however, that more recent editions in the Routledge Focus on Design Pedagogy series, of which this book is part, provide further examples of how to shape and enrich students' learning with a view to better prepare them for a rapidly changing world.

I should, finally, also like to offer a critical note with regard to the claim to innovation and the 'breaking of new ground' that this book makes. Innovation, in the current academic climate, is, like so much else today, prone to inflation and can easily ring hollow when pursued or invoked for its own sake. What may be considered innovative, or indeed 'progressive', remains, in the absence of a clear definition and related criteria, not only debatable (both in pedagogical terms

and in view of the pressure on staff to produce original research), but also problematic, for there is also an argument to be made for tried-and-tested methods, some of which may have gone out of fashion or have been forgotten or have been in use for some time already (including peer review and working with exemplars), to be considered equally important and valid in attempting to 'nurture the enculturation of students into a community of practice' and, I would add, prepare them for careers outside of the profession. We know that a significant number of architecture and design students do not end up working in architectural or design practice and instead redefine their career along different trajectories and in other fields of study. For them, as much as for those who do become architects and designers, the teaching and learning environment needs to be able to accommodate strategies that are inclusive (of alternative methods) also from this, or indeed *their*, perspective. With this comment I hope to open and extend the debate around studio pedagogy with a view to making this learning and teaching environment perhaps less insular, inward-facing and self-centred than it often is. New ground can arguably best be broken by venturing into new territory beyond the confines of a discipline or involve other communities and practices than the one(s) we find ourselves working in.