

A Case for Pedagogical Praxis

Phoebe Crisman

Writing from the position of both architectural practitioner and educator, I will approach the session theme of praxis on two fronts. An initial analysis of the relationship between changing conceptions of both architectural education and practice will locate my own position on praxis. Although this specific understanding of praxis does not match the standard dictionary definition, it is certainly shared by many in the architectural discipline.¹ The current usage of “architectural praxis” commonly refers to a practice *informed* by theory, rather than merely “the practice of a technical subject or art, as opposed to or arising out of the theory of it.”² By expanding this one-way relationship into one that is reciprocal, theory is considered as a basis for action, and action is examined as a theory-producing act. Through my own pedagogical praxis—the design of two “theory” courses—I have applied a theoretical position on architectural praxis, which insists that theoretical and applied knowledge are inextricably linked and should be taught as such. Thus, students enrolled in these Architecture Theory courses both read texts and studied projects frequently created by the same architect. Given the current backlash against an increasing autonomous and singular version of theory, these courses seek to open a discussion within the academy on the role of contingent and even useful architectural theory as an integral navigational component in architectural education and ultimately professional practice.

Architecture: Education + Practice

An appropriate means by which to analyze the link between education and practice might be through a series of difficult questions. The Praxis session statement posed the pointed query, “What must an architect learn in order to practice the craft, *however it may be defined*?”³ A response to this question requires a definition of disciplinary boundaries both inside and outside the academy—limits that are constantly shifting due to complex societal changes. These ongoing modifications, sometimes termed an “architectural identity crisis,” are part of a current re-evaluation of architecture in all its manifestations. While some analyses are judicious in tone, such as Robert Gutman's *Architectural Practice: A Critical View*,⁴ and the “*Boyer Report*,”⁵ many articles in the popular press, such as “Can this Profession be Saved?,”⁶ portray a truly alarming state of affairs. Is there actually a disciplinary crisis in architecture, or is the “crisis” more media hype and architectural pessimism? Are these publications symptomatic of a serious condition, or are they merely fabricating an exquisite corpse for dissection? Undoubtedly our social referents and frames are rapidly changing, and architecture is changing as well. Although radical shifts are also occurring in most professions, within the university disciplinary structure, and in society in general, the ongoing changes in architecture are frequently discussed as problematic and particular to the discipline. Perhaps this is a result of the common view that architecture exists outside of the global and local economic, political, and socio-cultural structures.

This perceived architectural autonomy creates a two-fold problem. Architects are assumed to have the power to radically transform the profession and the built environment, if only they were committed to “building community” and promoting the public good. Unfortunately, as much as architects might champion these noble goals, their effectiveness is limited without the simultaneous commitment of clients, citizens and governmental agencies. Public education that promotes a heightened awareness of architectural and environmental issues promotes positive change in this regard. On the other hand, architecture students and practitioners are often inadequately informed about broader issues such as ecological impact,

political and economic power structures, and costs and benefits to society. Rather than view change as problematic, we should encourage forms of practice, pedagogy and theoretical research that embrace new potentials for creative collaborations.

If both education and practice must be open to change, how might this impact their relationship—one that has recently been discussed as fragmented, unclear and even oppositional. Two common positions in this regard oppose architectural education as the study of the discipline of architecture, with architectural education as practical training for future professional architects.⁷ The most extreme manifestations would either transform professional education into a lengthily liberal arts degree or a technical school curriculum.⁸ As always there is a difficult balance between specific content (knowing what) and applied knowledge (knowing how). Rather than falling back on an outmoded dialectic and agonizing over the theoretical/applied knowledge balance, however, a more complex concept of praxis might address this issue.

Just as the academy prepares students to manage the “practical” complexities of architectural practice, students should also be introduced to an integrated conception of practice that includes theory and ethics as essential components—not theory as an inflexible grand narrative, but knowledge of how others have grounded their work, and a critical self-awareness of their own bases for action. Architectural theory courses are an ideal means to develop students’ cultural awareness, critical thinking abilities, and a sense of responsibility for the physical environment. In as much as architecture is a social and political act, however, it is also the tectonic act of making a precise artifact. A high level of specialized knowledge and technique is necessary in order to conceptualize and implement a precise physical condition. Peter Rowe has described this particular combination of problem solving and “tectonic imagining”—the capacity to see a project and place it somewhere, as “design thinking.”⁹ Informed by theory, design thinking is the method that architects employ to cope with the rapidly changing and diverse knowledge required in practice, where each project involves a new set of variables—such as evolving construction technology, unprecedented building types, and diverse climatic conditions. The *Boyer Report* asserts that architects are excellent “life-long learners”—this by necessity as well as desire. Perhaps it is the ability for informed and creative learning, the praxis of exploration, which ultimately distinguishes architectural education and practice.

A convergence of recent societal trends, three in particular, has placed architecture in a powerful position to influence positive change through design insight—an insight that should be fostered in the academy and practiced professionally. Greater public concern and ethical responsibility for the environment, sustainability as an organizing concept for this concern, and the increasing importance of images in communication, together create a favorable situation for design innovation. Architects and educators are well placed to act as advocates for public environmental concern, especially given that “the public demand for environmental improvement is consistently ahead of governmental, business and regulatory response.”¹⁰ Private sector clients, even if not personally committed, will begin to respond to the demand for sustainable architectural environments. Just as there was widespread public concern at the turn of the century for public health and related urban and architectural innovations, contemporary environmental issues could be a similar impetus for change. Architects must meet the challenge with creativity, a strong theoretical basis, and technical expertise. Unfortunately, many architecture programs do not adequately engage these environmental concerns. Theory courses, in concert with professional practice, technology and design studio classes, must collaborate to address these pressing issues.

In addition to the above two intertwined subjects, the third potential lies in the architect's role as image-maker. The last ten years have seen a powerful shift to more images and fewer words within our culture. Rather than lament this increasing image dependency, Andrew Saint suggests, "the long-term challenge for the architectural profession...is to ride this exciting, undisciplined, licentious, and dangerous beast, to control this irresponsible lust for image that pervades our culture. Architecture is a visual thing, and cannot fail to benefit from that unstoppable urge."¹¹ The potential for new image-based media in design and representation, even production techniques, should be embraced in both theory and practice. In addition, theory is one of the most powerful means within the architectural curriculum to critically examine the limitations and dangers of the image.¹²

In summary, these three major societal changes could give architects stronger support in their role of shaping the physical environment. Architects' skill in creative vision and visual communication position them well in an increasingly image-based society. To this end, architectural education must promote both theoretically informed critical insight, and the practical ability to conceive and make visions real. This requires that architectural education broaden its horizons to provide students with a theoretical understanding of the interdependent disciplines of landscape, urbanism and architecture, and related ethical, social, political and environmental issues. All this theoretical learning is necessary, while still emphasizing the specific architectural design skills that ultimately define the architect's discipline, since a theoretical apprehension of the world and its critical application to architecture is one of the architect's most powerful means to conceptualize the unbuilt. Most important, however, is that the reciprocity between theoretical and applied knowledge is constantly discussed and demonstrated across the curriculum, lest students proceed into professional practice with a polarized understanding of our richly interwoven discipline.

Praxis: Theory + Practice

These thoughts on architectural education and practice have supported specific pedagogical strategies to engage praxis in the architecture curriculum. Although the synthetic role of studio pedagogy is frequently cited, the crucial role of architectural theory is rarely discussed. Currently many architecture departments are negatively reacting to theory in general, based on a particularly prevalent, but singular strain of linguistically based, continental theory. Given this backlash against an architectural theory increasingly autonomous from architectural design and practice, my objective is to redefine and reposition theory within the architecture curriculum. This proposed conception of praxis requires moving architectural theory from self-imposed exile into an integrated position. If the design studio (in education) and the architectural project (in practice) occupies the central position of synthesis, then architectural theory would form a permeable layer immediately surrounding this core. The multiple spheres of knowledge that inform the core would filter through this theoretical layer—in both directions. If one were to make a planetary analogy, an atmosphere of architectural thinking and a stratosphere of architectural theory would surround the earth—the site of action. This integral conception of "praxis" has guided the structure and content of two "theory" courses that I have developed and taught in the last three years. These courses seek to open a discussion within the school on the crucial role of theory in architectural education, and emphasize the importance of establishing a reciprocal relationship between theory and design practice.

At this moment, others are also working to bridge the gap between theory and practice—a particularly wide gap in North American architecture culture. For example, a recent periodical brochure proclaims, “*UME* gets behind the image to where the ideas are.”¹³ The first editorial statement for the newly founded journal *Praxis* identifies the aforementioned gap. “As students recently immersed in academic culture, we discovered that the majority of American architectural publications represented contemporary work either through theoretical texts, with an often tenuous relation to built or buildable projects, or through unsubstantiated images with little critical or conceptual discussion. We wondered why architectural writing and building were presented as independent investigations when we understood them as co-dependent.”¹⁴ This false dichotomy is largely due to the desire for validation by, and the importation of research method from, other disciplines. A concise statement of this problem is found in Mark Linder’s essay, “Architectural Theory is No Discipline.” “As it is usually understood, architectural theory is not a theory that is architectural, but is an attempt to make architecture theoretical. But it seems that being theoretical means to borrow the ‘discipline’ of the scientist or the philosopher, and while this may be enlightening or potentially very sophisticated, it ignores the fact that architecture does not share all the features of philosophy or science.”¹⁵ For those engaged in architectural research, this divide between architecture and science is a condition of which we are well aware. Rather than lamenting the disconnected state of architectural theory, I have attempted to make a case for praxis—to put my theory into practice—in the design and teaching of the following courses.

Pedagogical Praxis: 2 Theory Courses

An elective graduate seminar taught at the University of Wisconsin in the 1999 and 2000 spring semesters, entitled *Architecture + Urbanism: Theory + Practice*, considered the two interrelated issues of disciplinary boundaries and praxis. We questioned the boundaries of architectonic activity within the city, probed architecture’s potential to shape public and private urban spaces, and examined how theories and practices coexist. As a basis for these investigations, we studied significant architectural and urban theories, practice strategies, and design projects developed from the 1960’s to the present. Students were extremely enthusiastic about the investigation and creative in their individual speculations and projects. While the seminar format was a perfect venue for this inquiry, a greater pedagogical challenge and perhaps more significant curricular impact occurred while introducing similar issues in the redesign of a large Theory course.

Architectural Theory and Analysis, a required lecture course for third-year students in the Bachelor of Science in Architectural Studies program, has had a long and varied history in the University of Virginia curriculum. A previous manifestation was organized around major philosophical movements that only tangentially related to the making of architecture. As stated in the objectives of that course, “architectural theory acts as a critical discourse *parallel* to practice, as its conscience and provocation.”¹⁶ Although the course was challenging and diverse in content, departmental faculty were concerned with the difficulty that students experienced in linking this parallel discourse with other aspects of the architecture curriculum. The restructuring of the Fall 2000 course format questioned how complex theoretical issues might be considered *within* the discipline of architecture. The concept of praxis—in the sense of practice informed by theory, and theory informed by practice—became the central focus.

We began with Vittorio Gregotti’s proposal that, “...one must insist on theoretical research as a direct foundation for action. This means, in our case, as material for the artistic practice of architecture.”¹⁷ Rather than chronologically structuring the

course around major philosophical or cultural theory positions, specific architectural concepts were examined and related to theoretical positions. Theories of site, the place of use: relations between form and function, and tectonics and making are a few lecture examples. Exemplary projects were examined not to “illustrate theories,”¹⁸ but as a grounding for discussion and analysis. Initial lectures and readings introduced diverse and clearly articulated positions on the relationship of theory and practice. Concurrently, students were asked to “propose your own Architectural Manifesto, which concisely states the main intentions, values and goals of your current architecture position.” Given only one day and one 11”x17” page, students produced a rich array of positions, including a complete rejection of theory, “An Entirely Noncommittal Manifesto,” a call for “Acceptable Ambiguity,” an argument for environmental sustainability in “Natural Archishelter,” and “A Manifesto on the Virtue of a Messy Desk: Begin with Abundance.” Through a class review of the sixty-five manifestos and the assigned readings, students debated and proposed a range of possibilities for praxis. For example, they were intrigued by Bernard Tschumi’s statement that, “in architecture, concepts can either precede or follow projects or buildings. In other words, a theoretical concept may be either *applied* to a project or *derived* from it. Quite often this distinction cannot be made so clearly.”¹⁹ The students were particularly interested in theoretical writing by practitioners that emphasized the reciprocity between design and ideas. For instance, while reflecting on her dual role as architect and theoretician in *Architecture from Without*, Diana Agrest posited that architects could work in both the critical and normative registers. “Criticism is developed from questions for which we have no answers, from a first how to a why, a why that makes us bridge those two kinds of discourses.”²⁰ During the course of our investigation, we also sought to proceed from the “why” back again to the “how.” A series of lectures under the heading, *Making: building specificity*, investigated theories emerging *from* the “how” of architecture. The work of Carlo Scarpa, Steven Holl and a number of contemporary Swiss architects were examined. Peter Zumthor’s buildings and writings were considered in light of his statement that “there are no ideas except in things.”²¹ Thus, theory was not only presented as a search for truth or epistemological answers, but as operative and contingent on the specifics of architectural making.

Ultimately, the students enthusiastically confronted the creative possibilities inherent in the relationship between theoretical speculation and the apparent constraints of architectural design and practice. Weekly discussion sections were subdivided along studio lines, so that studio and theory conversations would overlap, and they did. In addition to leading discussion sessions, Graduate Teaching Assistants also participated in their students’ studio reviews. Studio instructors frequently mentioned the significant impact that theory readings and lectures were having on studio discussion and design work, and the reverse was certainly true for the theory sections. Thus, the reciprocal relationship that I sought to foster was taking effect, even if many students initially rejected the possibility or even desirability of “praxis.” By the end of the semester, students voiced and conveyed opinions in course evaluations that communicated the connectedness of theory to their design thinking, studio work and other classes. One student wrote that “the class was very helpful in learning how to understand theory and how to translate ideas from concepts to built form. It has clarified the need for theory and the nature of architecture in general...I especially feel that it has helped me in other classes as well.” Others commented on their changed understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. For instance, “this course did a good job at explaining architecture theories and explaining how they correspond to buildings. It has helped to clarify what these theories mean to the practice of architecture.”²² Rather than willingly perpetuate the tired dialectic between theory and practice, students speculated on the reconceptualization of architectural praxis.

This new understanding of praxis is informing the students' work in my current studio, whose members all participated in the previous *Architectural Theory and Analysis* class. Our discussions in reviews and individual desk critiques may now draw on specific theoretical knowledge and speculative ability. We are using two important written devices, the statement of intent and review response, to clarify conceptual intentions and reflect upon the individual process of design thinking and making. Based on my experience with these methods in past studios, students have consistently improved their conceptual project investigations and critical abilities. An initial reluctance to engage in simultaneous written and visual studio investigations disappears as students develop confidence in their design intentions, and their multiple means of communicating intentions. In the course of studio discussions, we also observed how theoretical concepts were addressed in the project review process. Although critics never literally proclaimed, "What is your theory?" questions such as "What's your big idea?" or "Why are you doing what you're doing?" were definitely searching for the underlying theoretical basis of a project. Until our discussions, most students had not understood such inquiries as having anything to do with "theory." Although this point seems absurdly obvious, I believe it exemplifies the problem of a "parallel" theoretical discourse. I am not suggesting that the sophistication of a third-year student's design intentions can be equated with the complexity of our theory class readings; however, the reservation of the word "theory" for only rarified epistemological arguments precludes the generation of truly architectural theories. If theory is necessary as a means of providing frameworks for understanding and acting within the world, we cannot impose tight limitations that disregard the value of working and contingent theories of architecture.

Designing and teaching these courses have permitted me to both "put into practice" my emerging theory of praxis, and observe the results within the broader architecture curriculum. The establishment of a reciprocal relationship between theoretical and applied knowledge, a condition that many support but rarely engender in the academy, appears to be a feasible means for bridging the gap, or even removing the distinction, between these frequently opposed forms of knowledge. The concept of praxis would be carried with students beyond the academy and into professional practice. Thus, they would be better prepared to critically engage societal changes and ethical considerations, and finally to formulate their own clearly articulated theory for action.

Notes

- ¹ This is evident in many recent publications, such as the title and intentions of Bernard Tschumi's 1994 book, *Event-Cities (Praxis)*. In his introduction, Tschumi states that the book "is about 'praxis' insofar as it documents the elaboration of a conceptual process that is inseparable from the actual making of architecture." Stan Allen uses the term "project" with similar meaning in his essay, "Practice vs Project," *Praxis*, issue 0, vol.1 (Fall 1999): 112-123.
- ² First definition from *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
- ³ Emphasis added to quotation.
- ⁴ For a statistically based sociological study of the state of the US architecture profession in the late 1980's, see Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988).
- ⁵ Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang, *Building Community: A New Future for Architectural Education and Practice* (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996). This study was commissioned by five national architecture organizations: ACSA, NAAB, NCARB, AIA, and AIAS. For an insightful critique of the Boyer Report and counter-proposal, see Robert Segrest, "The Architecture of Architectural Education," *Assemblage* 33 (August 1997): 76-80.
- ⁶ Thomas Fisher, "Can this profession be saved?" *Progressive Architecture* (February 1994): 44-49. Also see Michael J. Crosbie, "The Schools: How They're Failing the Profession," *Progressive Architecture* (September 1995).
- ⁷ For an insightful examination of the concept of the architectural discipline, see Carol Burns, "Professional Education and Practice. The Current Crisis: an Approach to Alignment," *GSD News* (Winter/Spring 1996): 4-6.
- ⁸ This position has many facets, with some concerned about the perceived inward focus of architecture, while others question the dominance of studio. Critiques of studio pedagogy as inherently gender-biased, and concerns about the "hidden curriculum" challenge the model of integrative learning highly praised by the "Boyer Report," Donald Schön, and others. For an examination of the "hidden curriculum," see Thomas A. Dutton, "The Hidden Curriculum and the Design Studio," *Voices in Architectural Education* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1991): 167. Donald Schön discusses the highly positive aspects of the studio model in his essay, "The Architectural Studio as an Exemplar of Education for Reflection-in-Action," *JAE* 38/1 (Fall 1994): 2-8.
- ⁹ Peter Rowe, *Design Thinking* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987).
- ¹⁰ Boyer: 21.
- ¹¹ Andrew Saint, "Architecture as Image: Can We Rein In this New Beast?" in William S. Saunders (ed.), *Reflections on Architectural Practices in the Nineties* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996): 19.
- ¹² For a discussion of potential threats to architecture by the image, see Neil Leach, *The Anaesthetics of Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999).
- ¹³ Quote taken from *UME's* subscription brochure. *UME* edited and published by Haig Beck and Jackie Cooper at The University of Melbourne, Australia.
- ¹⁴ Amanda Reeser and Ashley Schafer (eds.), "Defining Praxis," *Praxis*, issue 0, vol.1 (Fall 1999): 6.
- ¹⁵ Mark Linder, "Architectural Theory is No Discipline," *Strategies in Architectural Thinking*. John Whiteman, Jeffrey Kipnis, Richard Burdett (eds.), (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992): 167.
- ¹⁶ "Parallel" italics added. Excerpt from ARCH 308: *Architectural Theory and Ethics* syllabus 1997 taught by Kate Nesbitt at the University of Virginia.
- ¹⁷ Vittorio Gregotti, "The Necessity of Theory," *Casabella* 494 (September 1983): 13.
- ¹⁸ See Bernard Tschumi's discussion of "one of the great characteristics of architectural work: you can also think through it." *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996): 18.
- ¹⁹ Tschumi: 19.
- ²⁰ Diana Agrest, *Architecture from Without: Theoretical Framings for a Critical Practice* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991): 1.
- ²¹ Peter Zumthor, "The Hard Core of Beauty," *Thinking Architecture* (Basel: Birkhauser, 1999): 34.
- ²² Anonymous student evaluation comments from the Fall 2000 semester. The following are a few other examples of this shift. "This course was very relevant toward my design thinking, especially in the ideas I gained from the various designs I was exposed to. The course also taught me to think more clearly in the area of architectural theory, and added a new dimension to my architectural understanding." "This course was very relevant. I feel that my design process was enriched a great deal because of the ideas and works that were presented."