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Embedding Urban Design Values in an Architectural Design Studio

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ABSTRACT

The global sustainability mandate has meant that built environment professionals are increasingly engaged with efforts to create a thriving future. Within the Arab Gulf, the discussion on sustainability has expanded to include urban design values of place-making, public realm and well-being. However, despite the inclusion of urban design as a course in architectural curricula, most students continue to demonstrate a heightened focus on the design object with relatively lesser regard to its role in place-making and creation of sustainable environments. This paper documents the experience of a mid-level architectural design studio in Abu Dhabi, wherein specific efforts were taken to embed urban design thinking within the design studio through site selection, development of design brief and other aspects of the design process, adopted towards this aim. Patterns in student responses, practical teaching strategies, student designs and post-course reflections are also discussed with a view to optimize the outcomes of studio teaching.

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EMBEDDING URBAN DESIGN VALUES IN AN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN STUDIO

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Abstract

The global sustainability mandate has meant that built environment professionals are increasingly engaged with efforts to create a thriving future. Within the Arab Gulf, the discussion on sustainability has expanded to include urban design values of place-making, public realm and well-being. However, despite the inclusion of urban design as a course in architectural curricula, most students continue to demonstrate a heightened focus on the design object with relatively lesser regard to its role in place-making and creation of sustainable environments. This paper documents the experience of a mid-level architectural design studio in Abu Dhabi, wherein specific efforts were taken to embed urban design thinking within the design studio through site selection, development of design brief and other aspects of the design process, adopted towards this aim. Patterns in student responses, practical teaching strategies, student designs and post-course reflections are also discussed with a view to optimize the outcomes of studio teaching.

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1. Introduction

As societies across the globe, endeavour towards a low carbon footprint and sustainable development, built environment professionals find themselves with increased responsibility towards this mandate. The recent past has seen several Arab Gulf cities develop Vision documents with a strong focus on sustainability. The discussion and research on sustainable design has progressed to include urban design values of place-making, public realm and well-being and built environment professionals are expected to be responsive towards these. However, student designs continue to indicate a pattern where greater attention is provided to the design object as opposed to the design process. The role that the design object plays in place-making and prospective sustainable development of the context assumes a lesser significance. While this pattern may be influenced partly by the architectural icons which dominate the media and landscapes of the Arab Gulf, design education, and the manner in which is imparted, also play an instrumental role. The site selection, choice of building typology, development of design program,

formulation of submission requirements and structuring the design process carry several messages and are critical to informing the students' value system. Various patterns in student preconceptions, reactions and teaching attitudes that are common in architectural design studios may present potential barriers to effective integration of urban design thinking.

Mounting pressures to cover course content in architectural curricula, limitations of time and other resources along with students' keen focus on high grades creates a tendency to insulate design education from the context. The high premium on the final design product and the centering of the design process around the student designer encourages the production of signature styles. Hence various aspects of design education contribute towards a disconnect with urban design thinking.

Since architectural education is tasked with the aim of preparing architects for the changing needs of the profession, there appears to be a scope for introducing modified strategies in design studio

teaching. Guided by this aim and informed by previous experiences in teaching design studios, the author had the opportunity to explore strategies to embed urban design values in a mid-level architectural design studio at a University in Abu Dhabi, UAE. This paper documents and reflects on this experience.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews salient themes regarding architectural design education, shortcomings and areas for improvement. Bandini (1997)ⁱ discusses the education of an architect and how the manner in which it is taught, distances itself from the people. Jarett (2005)ⁱⁱ summarizes various 'blind spots' in the design studio caused by isolation of the design programme. These blind spots lead to studio seclusion, propagate abstraction, reinforce the production of signature objects and detach the student from the context. He further describes the example of a studio (LASS Project), where efforts were taken to engage with the city.

Morrow (2005)ⁱⁱⁱ advocates for more inclusive design and identifies the barriers to the mainstream adoption of inclusive design as choice of sites, design programmes, representation of spatial experiences, complacency in understanding implicit role of users in the design and misunderstanding the importance of analysis and its relation to design.

Frampton (1991)^{iv} discusses the preoccupation with new and exotic as a prevalent theme in design studios which gains precedence over everyday issues. The 'abstract way of thinking and a media-oriented justification for any type of design' is also a subject for discussion by Salingaros and Masden (2010)^v.

Tenbrink et al (2006)^{vi} discuss the user perspective and suggest various ways in which architects may consider it (participatory design, role play, providing

rich and detailed descriptions of an idealized user, observation and ethnographic research and the reliance on cognitive walkthroughs). Till (2009)^{vii} discusses the relation of architecture with the real world and how architects consider the user as an intrusion / contaminant corrupting the pure designed environment. Salama (2009)^{viii} discusses the need to integrate creativity and social responsibility and also presents international paradigmatic trends on Arab architectural education and highlights contextual issues in education and pedagogy in the Arab world.

3. Studio Methodology

This studio was a part of the Bachelors in Architecture program at a University in Abu Dhabi, UAE, offered in the fall of 2016 as a mid-level studio. Informed by key themes that emerged from the review of literature and with experiences from having taught the same design studio in the past, key objectives were identified to encourage a more context-sensitive approach to design which integrated urban design thought.

These objectives were addressed through adaptations in the following areas: Selection of building type, Site selection, Development of the program and the Design Process.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

Key exercises introduced in each of the four areas identified for adaptations in studio methodology were documented, along with student responses and evidence of learning. Key findings from the studio experience and post-course reflections have been discussed under various themes.

- Student reactions to fish market as a building typology
- Avoiding abstraction by reinforcing student engagement with the design problem
- Flexibility in interpreting requirements and developing the program

- Alternative methods of representation

While many other opportunities (role-play, user participation in pin-ups, possibility of considering adaptive reuse) could not be explored due to paucity of time, these small incremental changes supported many positive outcomes. Student designs showed a wide diversity in design approaches with a greater awareness and discussion of the role of the design in the larger context. The process of design development also

demonstrated enhanced responsiveness of user requirements and activities.

Studio teaching plays an instrumental part in the pedagogy of architectural education. At the same time, it is frequently seen as the most expensive and least understood component of architectural education. The benefits of studio teaching need to be optimized in order to prepare students as future professionals who can better serve the sustainability agenda.

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