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PRAXXIS: Always Personal, Always Political, Always Pedagogical

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Abstract

PRAXXIS is a feminist research collective and vertical teaching studio (atelier) in both the BA(Hons) and M.Arch courses at the Manchester School of Architecture (MSA). Alongside research activity, staff in the PRAXXIS atelier activate students to create projects which are both personal and political, through robust, open and unapologetically feminist conversations. We explore and ask questions as to what feminist architecture might be now and, in the future, investigating inequalities in society and understanding what they may mean for physical and digital environments. Project Road Maps are an explicitly reflective pedagogical tool, assisting students in comprehending who they are becoming.

The MSA is one of the largest schools of architecture in the UK of nearly 1000 students, with a three year undergraduate professionally validated course (BA), a two year professionally validated post-graduate Masters course (M. Arch), a small Landscape Architecture Masters and a large Masters in Architecture & Urbanism. For the final year of the BA and both M. Arch years the school runs a vertical studio (atelier) system where pedagogies, sites, briefs and methodologies are shared in various ways across the year groups offering some great insights into informal and formal peer learning, shared educational environments and access to broader a staff team. There are eight distinct ateliers to choose from with eight distinct approaches for Design Studio teaching.[1]

For the purpose of this paper we are primarily discussing examples from the final M. Arch year but learning approaches and some shared briefs are used across all three years. In simple structure, the final year of the M. Arch is split into three Studio units of assessment: Studio 1, 2 and 3. In Studio 1 the students prepare their research questions, select a suitable location for investigation, and start propositional design activities. In Studio 2 designs are tested at a variety of scales and with a multitude of methods. In Studio 3 the key goal is to uncover the most effective communication strategies for their projects. This manifests in a series of portfolios considered for different audiences—the institution, the broader built environment professions, multiple collaborators and potential employers.

One of these ateliers, PRAXXIS takes an explicitly feminist approach, in particular intersectional feminism to explore the inequalities in society and what that may mean for the built environment. Intersectionality takes the position that the various layers of what we see as social and human characteristics—class, race, sexual identity, religion, age, disability, marriage status and gender identity do not exist separately from each other but are interwoven as a complex matrix.[2] We always want our students to take a position, an inclusive feminist position.

Helen Aston has developed the studio atelier, building on over twenty years teaching experience across a number of Schools of Architecture but primarily within a previous studio atelier, where the pedagogy was feminist but never stated explicitly by the teaching staff.[3] She invited her co-authors as three like-minded academics and practitioners with the ambition to form a new research and teaching collective at the school. The development of PRAXXIS was a reaction of frustration and the need to rethink and reclaim inclusive feminist teaching methodologies at the school that the collective of staff felt had become lost or entered the mainstream. For example, Helen had developed teaching approaches over a period of twelve years at the school using live projects and participative methods as a way for post-graduate students to define their year-long studio projects. This approach had been adopted by others as it was highly successful but then

became somewhat watered down or misappropriated. We make no apology for our position, proactively celebrating and insisting upon the use of the F word![4] The four women, led by Helen Aston, held workshops, talked lots, drew diagrams and built a small structure together to define what they wanted their new atelier to look and feel like.

We have created a platform using a critical architectural approach that allows the students to explore processes, methods and products as alternative forms of practice without reproducing prevailing values. For a number of years, we have asked our students to create transdisciplinary creative practices which challenges them to think and behave beyond the normalised practice that they might have experienced or been told about. These methods of working quickly become tools for the students to develop feminist thinking, questioning and design propositions. Our studio days are open to all approaches and allow a space for differing opinions and we have an 'open door' policy for discussions with others, receive queries from students from other ateliers for guidance and advice on all things feminist. By starting PRAXXIS the team wanted to challenge the existing status quo of the school to discuss issues that perhaps others find uncomfortable to question and investigate.[5]

Most days in studio brings together all three years (60 students in total) to undertake Feminisms Conversations where questions are posed for discussions about feminist agendas, the principles of understanding and respecting the knowledge and experience of others, what feminist architecture might be and types of feminist technologies are to list a few. For example, we have been developing twelve different categories of feminist technologies which we then ask the mixed groups of atelier students to discuss these in relation to their own personal projects. Peer to peer Feminisms Conversations often open up differences of opinions and interpretations of theories to enable all project ideas to evolve and grow. Guests are invited to take part in these conversations and present their knowledge and expertise. Depending on the stage of the project, tutorials and reviews take place in small groups for peer learning and support with occasional design charrettes that diversify the studio dynamics. The atelier team keeps balance with a broad intersectional guest list of speakers and reviewers (predominantly women) and positively promote this intersectional approach when cross atelier learning and discussions takes place. On a regular basis the team listens to the voices of the students as to how things are going and work to develop changes as reflective practitioners themselves.

Interestingly the evolving MSA student society's debating union set up an open discussion about gender and architecture. We were delighted to take part in the event and were thrilled by just how many of our students feel so strongly about creating a more inclusive profession. Many

attendees were mindful of the issues that will face them once they leave the (numerical) equality of their student cohorts.[6]

Each final year student undertakes a year-long thesis project which is self-directed but through weekly discussions with tutors aims to construct a clear research question with a personal agenda and political connection. The year starts requesting students a response to a 'call to action', a small brief based on the principles of a research poster aimed as a starting point for communicating ideas concisely, beautifully and provocatively. It is stimulant for students to define their project for the year ahead. The atelier practices openness and inclusivity which allows students to develop their own form of spatial practice. This has resulted in proposals of buildings, alternative networks, masterplans or a series of new created participative methodologies but all act as tool kits to transform the social, political and economic conditions of a place, institution or district (Fig. 1). We believe that this is fundamental to a feminist approach.

Figure 1. Architect as Post Capitalist by Adrianna Gilert. A Museum to Shopping, Warsaw Poland. As opposition to the existing typology of the shopping centre, the project of the Museum to Shopping was proposed, which tackled issues of the shopping centre typology in a capitalist economy in Poland. By demolishing the Stalin donated Palace of Culture and Science an alternative museum typology was created that worked towards female liberation and empowerment.

Students explore their relationship to feminism as a lens by which to view and reveal their project. Enabling them ultimately to develop feminist ways of doing architecture.[7] For example, one project by Abi Patel proposed an alternative but inclusive new intersectional model for the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), whilst another by Zuzanna Godek utilised the creation of participative design games to play with clients on a live project to debate the reuse of a dilapidated railway depot in Poland (Fig. 2). These methods enabled Zuzanna to work with the action group

and the authorities collaboratively to balance out the uneven conflict between those with capital and those whose voices are rarely heard. Another student, Becca Hazzard investigated the spatial issues of child care for modern family typologies, whilst another Oliver Martini used his personal experience of domestic abuse in his family, to design an alternative refuge facility for families escaping abusive partners.

Figure 2. Architect as Advocate by Zuzanna Godek. The voices rarely heard - reclaiming abandoned spaces, Gneizno Poland. On a live project in her home town of Gneizno in Poland Zuzanna used participative methodologies by creating design games to work with the conservation group fighting to save the delapidated station buildings from the hands of developers. She developed a series of strategies for socially inclusive regeneration, conservation and restoration of the buildings.
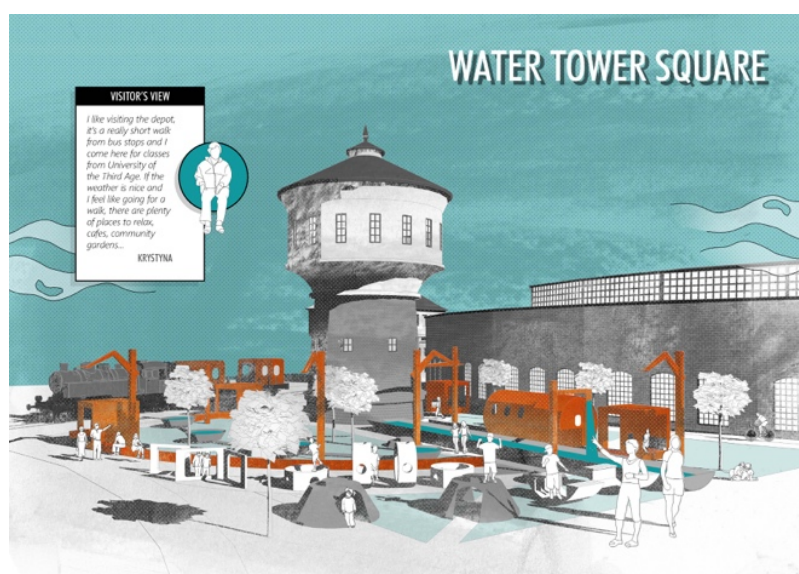
By defining a project from a personal position (an experience or simply a passion) and placing it within a political context, project work often results in the re-definition of systems—a key tenant of feminism with the objective to alter the existing system for the inclusion of women, or equality of women and inclusion of others.[8] The challenge for students is then to understand their personal experience in that newly laid out context. Shivani Gunawardana explored her first-hand experience of marginalisation of women when she revisited her local market in her home town in Sri Lanka, dominated by male stall holders where she realised she was the only women on the street (Fig. 3). Her design project intervened in the systems of the market, to be able to make, and take, space for a network of female social entrepreneurs. Proposals maximised views onto the street, improved personal safety, created affordable start-up workspaces for women and facilitated access routes with easy construction and maintenance methods. It concluded with a proposal that inserted market stalls for women above the existing streets, created an imagined feminist future

where the whole market became safer for them. Contrary to conceptually closed driven studios, the personal connection to projects and actual situations enables meaningful and authentic learning to take place.

Figure 3. Architect as Feminist Business Developer by Shivani Gunawardana. From outside the market to the inclusion of feminist social entrepreneurs, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Students are encouraged to work at three key scales from the larger political macro scale, to the project based meso scale and finally to the personal micro and human scale. This helps them emphasise and understand the relationship between the personal and political through their work. Projects are often located in a student's home country (e.g. South Korea, Poland, Sri Lanka and Cyprus, UK) and the interweaving of the personal and political connections to their place are an essential part of the learning.[9] The range of issues covered in projects is testament to the ambition and sensitivity of our students, as well as their honesty and openness with their lives in architecture. This was stark for one student who worked in South Korea, a country that lacks equality laws protecting marginalized communities such as people identifying as LGBT+. Staff worked closely him to ensure the message of their LGBT+ time-based masterplan was communicated distinctly alongside protecting their personal wellbeing when it came to publicly exhibiting the work (Fig. 4). This brings into focus an ethical dimension of our pedagogy, and one which requires constant attention and reflection by teaching staff. Clearly, we believe a personal connection is of paramount importance to both our style of teaching, as well to our students' methods of working, but we must always ensure a supportive and safe space is created for learning.

Figure 4. Architect as LGBT+ Masterplanner by Jaemin Shin. Increasing the political power and voices of gay men, Seoul South Korea. The design proposal was focused on gay men and the pocha stalls in abundance on the street. Using five strategic steps that responded to social changes at different periods of time the transitional strategies aimed to influence society until the street became a sexuality-equal pocha street.


PROJECT ROAD MAPS

"You must make your own map of your local environment-world – and better still, do this collectively – thereby making connections that expose you to other worlds and subjectivities in process"[10]

Titling this reflective activity as a Road Map gives connotations of journey, movement and destination. Students are asked to complete a reflective exercise at three points over the year, which is connected to formative and summative assessments. We correlate mapping their projects in this way to developing as independent and responsive designers with an empathy to themselves and their creative processes. Theorists such as Paulo Freire and bell hooks as critical feminist references influenced the design of this task, as well as the creators of often cited reflective cycles such as Kolb, Brookfield and Gibbs. [11] In parallel, Helen frequently reflects on her own teaching practice and regularly observes what she needs to unlearn and relearn. With this personal process in mind she developed a template for supporting the students to understand a reflective process—the Project Road Map. Jennifer Moon suggests that "deliberately introduced reflective activity can play a role in supporting any discipline."[12] Though she goes on to describe the difficulties of asking students to be reflective, and acknowledges that language and cultural differences can cause confusions in terms of interpretation. Developed into five elements the structure of the Road Map

(Fig. 5) helps to avoids a 'threatening' blank page.[13] The exercise enables students to value their own development and to learn to question their own preconceptions about particular social and cultural contexts in connection to their project work.
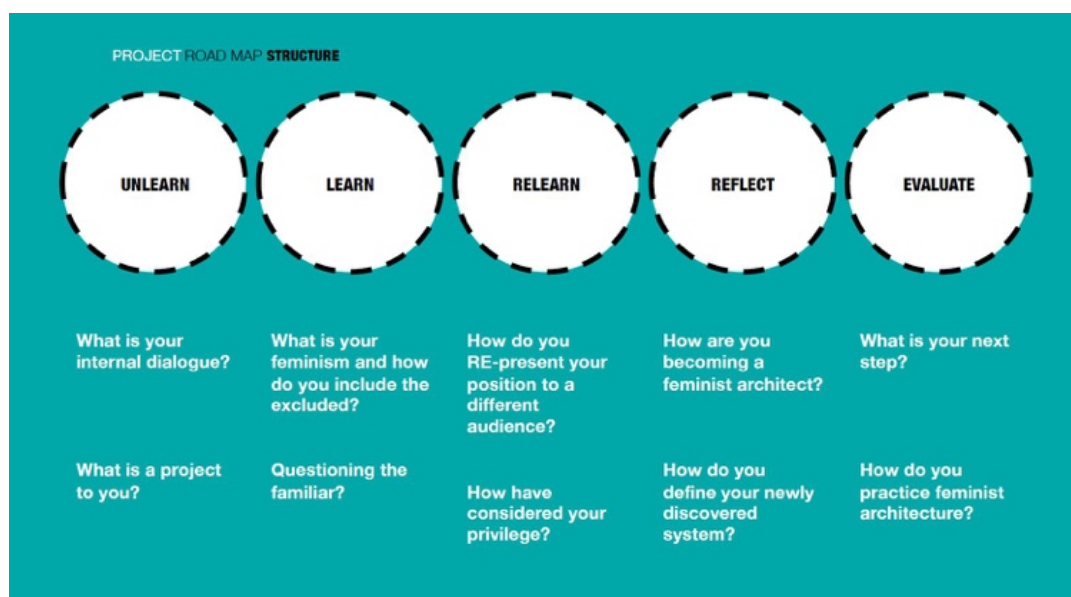
The first three categories (Unlearn, Learn, Relearn) ask students to think about the methods they used, their understanding of their personal worlds and to identify how they could change and evolve. It is important for each student to individually consider assumptions they make or challenge reoccurring design methodologies which result in the same conclusions. This requires the consideration of being able to unlearn previously learnt or dictated behaviour in design approaches. The fourth category, Reflect, gives space for each student to identify the nature of their experiences and lastly, Evaluate gives opportunity for an overall critical self-assessment. Within the five elements the template includes several additional themes which the student is also asked to consider, including Personal, Social Justice, Non- Hierarchical/ Collaborative and Engagement/Participation.

Architecture is inherently a reflective activity: we accept learning happens through doing and by experience.[14] But yet, staff were met with blank faces when introducing the task, as most students had not been asked to explicitly reflect on their methods, workings or design proposals. First attempts were somewhat superficial and overly descriptive about what had been done and what had not been done. However, as they repeated the activity, their reflections became more personal, sophisticated and enlightening. James Thompson argues that through personal stories, aspiring architects find ways of connecting their past, present and future selves, along with the interrelated dimensions of their emerging architectural identities.[15] By asking what kind of architect

do you want to be? the students pro-actively used their Road Maps to find a route onwards beyond the school of architecture and into their careers in practice.

Here are some examples of PRAXXIS projects where we have analysed the phases of the Road Maps for three students. The Road Maps were completed in parallel with students' design propositions and aided discussions about moving forwards with studio work. Primarily it was about thinking what kind of architect each student wanted to become. Sited alongside their research questions and with forthcoming careers in mind, for each student we have identified what other they might be as well as what architect they might become.

Black hair, the politics, the high street & the role models by Vikki Adegoke
Architect as Role Model

How can centring political identity create a practice of developing specific spaces which open up opportunities for social change and increase diversity in the built environment?

As a black girl growing up in the UK, it was rare for Vikki to see women and girls who looked like her celebrated within the British media. It is partly because of this lack of representation that led to her troubled relationship with her appearance, including her hair. In response to bell hooks' essay 'Homeplace (a site of resistance)' Vikki meticulously drew a series of exploratory studies to investigate how the domestic spaces at home were used for hairdressing.[16] She further developed spatial proposals to enable black women to be represented in high street business and designed a community hair salon and created spaces for debate, hairdressing and business mentoring.

Vikki's reflections move from the very personal towards much far wider reaching conclusions and it is clear she rediscovered a pride in her own identity and Nigerian heritage, stating "what others think about my hair isn't a representation of me or my hair." (Fig. 6) In her second Road Map she is bold, forthright and humbling stating everyone's journey is not the same and their political priorities are unique to their life experience. Architecturally, there was a transformation throughout the year that defined a new aesthetic, which respected the heritage context of a listed building located in Manchester city centre, as well as adding Nigerian influenced pattern, texture and colour to her proposed architectural palette (Fig. 7). The sense of personal growth is achingly apparent in her final road map: "Allowing validation of personal feelings allows one to flourish professionally". Vikki's Road Maps suggest an insight into the future Architect she may become—already evident by her election to RIBA Council and her involvement in the UK based Black Females in Architecture Network.

Figure 6. Vikki Adegoke's Project Road Maps.

Figure 7. Architect as Role Model by Vikki Adegoke. Afro hair, the politics, the High Street and the Role Models, Manchester.

The Robust Intersectional Building Agency (RIBA), a UK network by Abigail Patel

Architect as Politician, Strategist and Champion

How might I build a network, with the aim of shaking things up for the future of the riba, and how can I go about achieving this outside of a typically London-centric organisation?

The aim of Abi's project was to create a system for the new riba open and accessible to everyone and functioned in a supportive and non-hierarchical way (Fig. 8). There was an arc of emotion through Abi's Road Maps. In Studio 1, a sense of optimism and freedom could be seen, as she allows herself to define what an architectural thesis project might be and that it could be connected to her unpaid labour sitting on RIBA Council and volunteering for the Architects Benevolent Society. Abi used her research from her dissertation on gender pay gap reform and her Professional Studies report on a model for the alternative architect as a series of different academic outputs to challenge normal practice influenced by Deamer, Harris and Brown.[17] A sense of discomfort appeared in Studio 2; possibly unavoidable when we encouraged our students to be as bold as to propose alternative models for our profession! She noted the difficulties of challenging long-standing institutions, and the responsibility faced when wanting to change something you are part of but recognised the unspoken consequences of existing hierarchies. Abi ended her Studio 3 Road Map with a defiant and a clear goal to be an architect who helps break down the hierarchy of our profession and institutions, and open the doors to allow everybody to take part…

Figure 8. Architect as Politician, Strategist and Champion, Shaking things up, Preston and the UK by Abigail Patel. Abi developed an additional set of Building Regulations to take account of all of the Others who cannot access various parts of the built environement and our profession, that was called Part XX.

Rights and access for All, a new participative masterplan for Limassol, Cyprus by Panayiota Christoforou

Architect as Policy Maker

What are the rights of ownership for equitable access and shared space for all the citizens of Limassol?

Designing for an area that had seen limited or no development in the past 45 years due to conflict, politics of ownership and differences of personal and public interest, democratic design theories such as David de la Pena and Wates community planning tactics were an inevitable approach that Penny developed.[18] Framed around drawing connections, enhancing community growth, building relationships and breaking the isolation of many residents, her first Road Map highlighted the duality of working in a feminist way. She was confused about trying to understand the structures she needed to challenge and dismantle, as well as making space for the multiplicity of voices when working in participative ways. Critically she recognised the complexity of hearing many voices, that the information given is often biased personal views and rather than accepting comments as facts she recognised the conflicting context she was working within. Finally, Penny was explicit in the third Road Map about the "hands-on experience her project has given her, equipping her with skills and knowledge of new methodologies and affecting her career route." (Fig. 9).

Figure 9. Architect as Policy Maker by Panayiota Christoforou. Another district - rights and access for all, Limassol Cyprus.
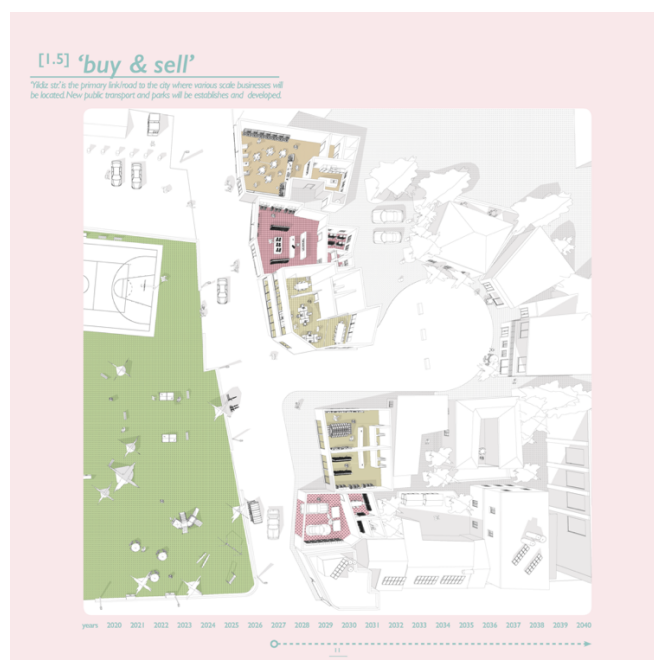
Conclusions on our feminist ways of teaching

"I'm not now who I was" [19]

In the context of ever-increasing complexities in technological tools, we want to see teaching that encourages individuality, supports participative methods, and challenges what an architect might do or become. At the heart of our pedagogy is an emphasis on the transformation of our students and with many having never questioned the systems around them, it is encouraging to see them change their attitudes, behaviors and practice. We believe that by educating students in this way, they can take agency to demand change in our profession. Perhaps we hope that they become feminist architects, defining whatever that might be, over time, and in their own ever-changing personal and political contexts.

Acknowledgements

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[1] Alongside studio Humanities, Technologies and Professional Studies are taught and integrated across the BA programme where as Research Methods, Dissertations and Professional Studies become the additional focus for the M.Arch programme. BA3 students stay with the atelier for the whole year as do year 1 and year 2 M. Arch students. However, at the point of progression into to the second M. Arch year students may change atelier, but many stay.

[2] A term originally coined by Crenshaw, Kimberlé, "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics" in University of Chicago Legal Forum (1989): 139–168.

The idea that "gender is the primary factor determining a woman's fate" is developed by bell hooks, Feminist Theory: from margin to center (New York: Routledge, 2014). It has developed from a Marxist Feminist position as discussed by Patricia Hill Collins, "Gender, black feminism, and black political economy" Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 568, no.1 (March 2000): 41–53.

[3] MSA Projects and MSA Praxis.

[4] The F-word we refer to here is Feminism.

[5] J. Till, Architecture Depends (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009): Ch.1.

[6] The gender imbalance in architecture is well documented in books such as by J.B. Brown, H. Harris, R. Morrow and J. Soane, ed., A Gendered Profession: The Question of Representation in Space Making (London: RIBA Publishing, 2016) and D. Stratigakos, Where Are All The Women Architects? (Oxford: Princeton University Press 2016).

[7] Whilst the idea of Spatial Agency is a key theoretical base for our work, we believe it is critical to "take space" in the discipline, profession and academy of Architecture. N. Awan, T. Schneider and J. Till, Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture (Oxon: Routledge, 2011): 26-34.

[8] As well as all other personal characteristics and circumstance ascertaining to an intersectional view of feminism.

[9] J. Saddlington, 'Learner experience: a rich resource for learning', in Empowerment through Experiential Learning, ed. J. Mulligan and C. Griffin. (London: Kogan Page, 1992): 37-49.

[10] H. Frichot, How to make yourself a Feminist Design Power Tool (Baunach: AADR, 2016): 8.

[11] P. Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (London: Penguin, new rev. ed 1996, c1970)

b. hooks, Teaching to Transgress: education as the practice of freedom (New York: Routledge, 1994)

D. A. Kolb, Experiential Learning - Experience as the Source of Learning and Development (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1984)

S. D. Brookfield, Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2nd ed. 2017)

[12] J. Moon, Learning Journals: A handbook for academics, Students and Professional Development (London: Kogan Page, 1999): 134.

[13] J. Moon, A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning (Oxon: Routledge, 2004): 140.

[14] Graham Gibbs, Learning by doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods (London: Further Education Unit, 1988).

D.A. Kolb, Experiential Learning: experience as the sources of learning and development (New Jersey: Pearson, 1984).

[15] J. Thompson, Narratives of Architectural Education: From Student to Architect (Oxon: Routledge, 2009): 10.

[16] bell hooks, "Homeplace (A Site of Resistance) in Yearning: Race, gender and cultural politics (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

[17] Peggy Deamer, The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labour, the Creative Class and the Politics of Design (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015)

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[18] David de la Pena, Design is Democracy: Techniques for Collective Creativity (Washington: Island Press, 2017)

Nick Wates, The Community Planning Handbook (London: Earthscan, 2000)

[19] J. Thompson, Narratives of Architectural Education: From Student to Architect (Oxon: Routledge, 2009): ix.