

Learning from Practice

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What is it to practice? What does practising involve and what does it mean in the context of architectural education? We use these terms in multiple, overlapping contexts: from modes of learning in education, through to informed ways of doing in professional practice. Yet, the nature of our 'signature' architectural pedagogy blurs the boundaries between these two distinct fields of architectural practice.¹ Of interest also is our practice as architectural educators, which reaches beyond the signature traditions to draw on the broader field of pedagogical research and practice. As a starting point, we can view practice as involving the application or realisation of ideas rather than the study of them per se. Learning to practice, by association, would therefore follow as the repeated performance of the activity to improve proficiency. This said, for practice to be more than just doing, for it to be informed and salient, surely a recourse to some form of embodied theory or mode of self-reflection is required.

The AAE 2019 conference Learning Through Practice was motivated by a desire to ask these questions and to explore what practising was about for the student, the architectural educator and the professional practitioner. Rather than focusing on theory as informing practice, the aim of the conference was to examine the relationship between theory and action and the role of critical reflection as part of practising itself. In particular, the conference sought to reflect on the value of habitual practices and their inherent or embodied theoretical compass, in other words, on how practice might itself pose as a mode of learning through the mechanism of practical reasoning. The conference aimed to draw on the growing awareness of the need for reflection within professional practice beyond the requirement to maintain technical knowledge, thus raising questions of how architects might sustain modes of reflective thinking grounded in creative enquiry as the basis of their practice. The conference invited debate on the signature traditions of studio practice and its pedagogical value in both educational and professional settings, through historical perspective, current innovations from the field, and through speculation on new modes of practice. Research presented at the conference discussed studio practice shaped by emerging technologies, the place of identity and social engagement, and the value of professional sphere as a space for learning. There were reflections on the ethics of studio culture and its signature pedagogies both through innovations in teaching and through the examination of historical examples.

Ray Land's keynote talk on Threshold Concepts and his recent work in the field of architectural education, reminded us that practice embodies conceptual frameworks that contain troublesome knowledge that once learned we may struggle to see ourselves.² Practising facilitates learning, but simply doing or repeating is insufficient for grasping this troublesome knowledge. To overcome these thresholds, Land argued that we need to hold ourselves in a liminal space where actions can be paused, and the reflective mind put to the task of thinking askew. He described how, in getting to grips with troublesome knowledge, this liminal space would allow the problems to be explored

and traversed reflectively. In this sense, liminal space is a kind of reflection moment within the flow of practice, involving looking back and, through critical reflection, seeing ways to move forward. Land also described thresholds as liminal spaces with troublesome knowledge as an unsettling dimension where certainties could be challenged, and new connections forged. In architectural education we can think of this as a liminal space for new perceptions and as a space for the visual and spatial imagination. This 'space' was explored at the conference, when Liza Fior, in conversation with Clare Twomey, discussed the value of Aby Warburg's 'law of the good neighbour' present in his Visual Atlas. According to this concept, the discovery lies next to the thing that you start your journey to look for, suggesting that reflection is not only an a posteriori action but one that can be embodied within practice itself.³ Fior also discussed the value of navel gazing both for students and in muf's own practice; a process of getting side-tracked on the contingencies of a situation, resulting in slowed coerced reflections and new thoughts. She also touched on the value of unsolicited research; an approach explained in more depth in her 2019 Royal Academy lecture entitled 'Not a Clean Slate'.⁴

The papers developed for this edition of the journal resonate with a number of these issues. The value of the crit for learning how to critically reflect is evaluated by Jan Silberberger while the recognition that practice does not take place on a 'clean slate' underpins the projects presented and discussed in this issue by Sandra Denicke-Polcher,⁵ Chi Roberts with Jos Boys,⁶ and Jose Carrasco Hortal, Benito Garcia Valero with Jesus Lopez Baeza.⁷ Silberberger's article examines the issue of how students learn to exercise critical judgement as part of the design process.⁸ His research describes a set-up that will be familiar to many of us: the crit, where, often, students are not active participants. He argues that this lack of active involvement has impact not just on the wider issue of engagement or participation, but also because developing the capacity to critique work per se is a key element of the iterative design process itself.⁹ Sandra Denicke-Polcher's analysis of the collaborative Crossing Cultures project embodies a broad sense of the role of education, echoing Wilhelm von Humboldt's concept of *Bildung* as '[t]he cultivation of my inner self, just as I am'.¹⁰ This is education seen as a journey of self-formation through civic activity and social bonding, with students encouraged to self-initiate individual roles and thereby cultivate their own identity.¹¹ The project also emphasises the need to learn how to learn, as well as to learn specific things, all grounded in moral action.¹² Similarly, Roberts and Boys' DisOrdinary Architecture Project highlights ways of nurturing the students' own positions of difference as creative starting points rather than seeking out the clean slate or emulating tutors and other in higher roles.¹³ In order to achieve this, students need to have the confidence that their identities and differences have credence, and that what is *there*, what they bring to the learning process, already has value; be that difference in understanding, interacting and engaging with the world or, as in the work of muf architecture/art, things from which new ideas and works can be forged. Carrasco, Garcia and Lopez's Transcultures and Communities project offers the ground for further

methodologies in the vein of unsolicited research. Students reached beyond normative design processes, and using transdisciplinary research frameworks developed a richer and more grounded knowledge of stakeholders and the cultural and social context of their work.¹⁴

At the same time, Carolyn Butterworth and Leo Care's reflection on their Bauhaus based workshop emphasises the need for theory as a dimension of practice however applied the context might be.¹⁵ Butterworth and Care question educators' (and students') perceptions that theory and practice lie at opposite ends of a spectrum, such that projects can only be grounded in either theory or practice; that live projects tend to be theory-lite and that polemical projects must correspondingly be disconnected from the practical realm.¹⁶ Their research explores the tensions that both hold and divide the practical from the theoretical within architectural practice and the perceived hierarchies that we place them into. Thus, practice, however 'practical' and self-evident in the form it takes, still embodies or connects with some form of theory through critical reflection either on or embodied in the actions themselves.

These participatory and conceptual perspectives of practising that frame the work presented in this issue are also reflected in Ray Land's argument that learning involves grappling with troublesome knowledge, despite the tendency to see habitual practices as self-evident and the acquisition of skills and capacities as a form of training. His framework recognises that practice embodies complex concepts that cannot be grasped simply through blind repetition so a kind of liminal reflective space outside of the flow of routine practicing is required. On the one hand, there is the everyday reflection needed to practise, what Michael Eraut describes as the necessary deliberation needed to make practical decisions.¹⁷ On the other hand, there is a more fundamental 'reflection-on-action' needed to critique the course of practice itself,¹⁸ and grapple with new knowledge and conceptual responses. This reflection-on-action forms the locus for the fundamental questions about practice, such as: is it going in the right direction? Is it acting in the best interests of stakeholders or the wider society? Or, more broadly, is it a force for good? In response to these questions, concepts of practice should seek to define the moral or ethical dimensions that can act to guide practical decisions. Aristotle's work on ethics is a valuable reference point in this respect.¹⁹ His question of how we should lead a life of virtue raises questions about the connection between moral values grounded in *hexis*, a term covering innate habits and dispositions and their application in practice. Of importance to the practitioner is a conception that grounds good judgements in virtuous inclinations rather than externally imposed ethical frameworks to inform moral judgements in practice. In other words, good or virtuous practice is one that connects practical action with necessary critical reflection in a single unified mode of working.

In his analysis of models of practice Stephen Kemmis questions how the

practitioner might come to better understand how these virtues interact with everyday practice.²⁰ His examination of Donald Schön's research and his concept of 'reflection-in-action' underlines the need for a recourse to reflective thinking,²¹ as a conceptualising of practice that engages theory within the activities of practice. This is characterised as thinking at a higher level than mere knowledge 'at your fingertips'; it involves a dynamic interplay between the observation of the implications of practical judgement and a simultaneous building of a cumulative faculty of virtuous wisdom. This is a reading of practice that characterises the *doing* of practice, the undertaking of practical reasoning, as needing some kind of recourse to propositional knowledge (theory, technical knowledge) that can then be enriched by experience.

Kemmis also refers to Pierre Bourdieu's definition of *habitus* and its value in understanding practice.²² Broadly, habitus is a concept that locates the everyday practical and dynamic embodied actions of (in our consideration) practicing, within wider socially ingrained frameworks shaped by the social, cultural and economic forces.²³ His conceptual framework acknowledges that moral decisions, whilst made rationally cannot truly be objective in nature, yet include attitudes and perceptions that are otherwise thought to be normal or right. It includes working methods, approaches and the patterns that make up physical organisations and it extends to include cultural or social patterns and relationships with institutions. The patterns that habitus assumes mirror those of Aristotle's bodily hexis, albeit at a broader, collective level: habitus cannot therefore be consigned to individual actions alone: individual actions become both an expression of it and a means of its promulgation. Bourdieu's conception of habitus thus provides a useful grounding framework for a critical questioning of both our teaching practices and the wider creative practices that we seek to nurture in our students.²⁴ In considering Schön's case study of design studio teaching for example, we can begin to ask what is also learned when the student 'tacitly' acquires the habits, modes of practising and language of practising of the tutor. The traditions of our pedagogy place great emphasis on learning through repeated practice, notions of training and the understanding learning tasks as self-evident activities. However, if we can understand all these as dimensions of habitus, we can then begin to reflect on how these seemingly simple embodied actions and behaviours are the channels through which the wider fields of culture and society are channelled. The question then arises as to what is acquired over and, as a consequence, what is denied expression through this process.

Viewing the papers presented here through the lens of habitus allows for a further reflection on the connection between practice and its social context, and the relationship between subjective individual dispositions and their capacity for accruing social capital. Roberts and Boys' Dis/Ordinary collaborations seek to challenge the loaded nature of everyday practice and by implication, the signature aspects of our pedagogy. The projects presented in this paper invite students to engage in the very fundamental but overlooked connection between their own embodied relationship with the world and the

act of designing it to be different, recognising that nurturing difference and individual identity should be a central and defining aspect of their emerging creative practice.²⁵ Bourdieu, similarly, argues that habitus involves both a playing by the existing rules and also a means to express an integrated sense of self: through this project students have the opportunity to explore this tension and more consciously shape their own practice.

Bourdieu locates habitus in what he terms the *field*, broadly interpreted as the distinct social or professional settings within which individuals as agents interact.²⁶ In our architectural field, these include the key signature pedagogy activities of the studio and the crit. The value and status of an individual's habitus reflects their standing within this *field*, and their capacity, in Bourdieu's terms to 'have a feel for the game'.²⁷ Silberberger's research highlights the unequal habitus of the players in the crit scenario, with students having little capital and therefore little capacity to shape the field of play.²⁸ For students to become effective players in this field they need to develop their capacity for to make critical judgements, that is, to develop their habitus as practitioners. The social capital of the individual is also central to the Crossing Cultures projects presented here by Denicke-Polcher as acquired and developed through social networks and the particular context of a social space.²⁹ The work recognises that habitus is not limited to technical skills and know-how; rather, it is fundamentally about social interplay extending from an integrated sense of self.³⁰ Lastly, Butterworth and Care's workshop also raises questions of habitus in practice contexts beyond the studio.³¹ In live projects, where the fields of academia and wider professional practice intersect, the prevailing doxa places value on decisions that appear practically derived rather than related to theory or critical reflection. In questioning this seemingly convenient division, the paper explores the value of theory in projects of an overtly practical nature, and thereby the implications for the practitioner's habitus. The challenge is to sustain a habitus informed by theory, in fields where the practical appears to have an overriding value within the prevailing doxa and that theory is mis-placed.

It is hoped that this special issue on practice will provide a useful starting point for an understanding of the value of critical reflection in and of practice, stimulate discussion on how we teach, and on a greater awareness amongst students of how their own developing practice is shaped. Since the conference in 2019, the global pandemic has forced us to rapidly and radically alter our teaching practices, many of our habitual signature practices have been put into abeyance, and we have hastily had to navigate ourselves through the broad and generic territory that is *blended* and online learning. If we can no longer sit at the students' side and convey through tacit action our own embodied practices, what new distanced practices do we need to develop instead? I hope that this edition will provide useful insight for this critical rethinking.

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