Troublesome Pedagogies: Introducing 'Otherness' to 1st Year Design Studio

Dr Dimitra Ntzani[a]1

Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University, Bute Building, 28 King Edward VII Ave, Cardiff, CF10 3AP, Wales, UK.

Abstract

In the context of UK-architectural education, unstable, diverse and ephemeral bodies are usually absent from 1st-year design studios, or find 'thin' passages to their briefs through the ARB (GC5-GC6) criteria. In their common manifestations, these bodies become a learning vehicle for introducing basic architectural tools and qualities (scale, orientation, views, materiality). However, during these initiations to embodied thinking, discussions on complexity, diversity and instability are often limited to sensory explorations of architecture or to debates on ergonomic design. These same qualities are then rarely addressed in 3rd and 4th-year studios, where students usually work on large-scale public programs, and manage the needs of 'average' users and diverse social groups. As a result, complexity, diversity and instability are then predominantly explored discursively in history and theory modules, keeping safe distance from the design studio.

In Feb 2016, 3 female design tutors designed a pedagogical experiment that aimed at re-introducing bodies of alterity in 1st year's studios, and at exploring ways that they can inspire bodily mindful, socially inclusive and ethically weighted design strategies. SKIN was developed and tested in the frame of the Innovative Learning Week, a festival of innovative learning practices hosted and funded by the University of Edinburgh. SKIN invited students to build a theoretical, practical and embodied understanding of otherness by exploring how the latter is culturally, socially and spatially constructed.

The paper interrogates the presence of 'other' bodies in 1st year design studios and ARB criteria and presents a twice-awarded pedagogical experiment to open a debate on the *troublesome* knowledges that the *threshold concept* of otherness holds for architectural education. It ultimately argues that 'other' bodies can help us explore aesthetical/technological aspects of design, promote synergies with other disciplinary-areas, raise awareness on unstable bodies and contexts, positively infiltrate 1st-year architectural education (GC1-2-3-5-6).

1. Introduction

The complex relationship of the human body to architecture is an intimate and longstanding one, and is strongly linked to the relationship of the human body to the wider cosmos. This relationship is reinvented over the years to reflect philosophical and architectural discourses that shape both. But while the debate presupposes asking both *what cosmos* and *what body*, the latter is often defined as abstract and generic, if not canonical and stereotypical, constraining significantly the course of disciplinary discussions.

Since the ontological separation of the body from the western cosmos (Plato & Hackforth 1972), dominant, stereotypical or canonical bodies worked as means to interpret, measure and design the complex realms we live in (Klein 1974). In Renaissance, for the sake of proportion, symmetry and order, these bodies were firmly constrained and defined by geometrical peripheries (Vitruvius 1913). In the 20th century and in the frame of phenomenological traditions, the geometrical boundaries are gradually questioned (Husserl 1999) but the body itself is not. Luckily, after the 2nd world war 'other' bodies claim a new relationship with architecture, bodies exhausted, traumatised, suppressed; bodies that wish to define the public realms they occupy. It is in this historical period, that architecture becomes heavily engaged in philosophical debates that evolve around the distinction of the body to the cosmos but also of the self to the 'other' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, Dewey 1980, Haraway 1990, Andy Clark & Chalmer 1998) and transform the discipline in education and practice.

The questions of *what cosmos* and *what body* define the core of our discipline, shaping how students, tutors and practitioners discuss, design, build and experience architecture. In the frame of UK higher education, while the boundaries of the body to cosmos are elaborately questioned, discussion on otherness or alterity are less popular.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +442922510193.
E-mail address: ntzanid@cardiff.ac.uk

The paper discusses the pedagogical value of keeping both debates (what body and what cosmos) open in the early years of architectural education. It looks into the 'cosmos' of 1st year design studios and into the 'bodies' that rise from the design briefs shaped by RIBA and ARB prescriptions. It then presents and reviews a pedagogical experiment that took place in the frame of the Innovative Learning Festival, run and sponsored by the University of Edinburgh, to discuss 'Otherness' as a *threshold pedagogical concept* and the trigger of *troublesome knowledge* (Meyer and Land 2003). The paper ultimate aims at opening a debate on the strengths and weaknesses that pedagogies of *radical otherness* hold for architectural education and their ability to give life to novel and other-directed empathic design.

2. The Body and Cosmos of UK Accrediting Institutions

In order to understand the bodies and cosmos depicted in 1st year studio briefs in the context of UK Higher education, it is essential to look at the institutional discourses that shape them. In United Kingdom, the Architects Registration Board and the Royal Institute of British Architects (hereafter noted as ARB and RIBA) are the main institutions that prescribe and accredit UG and PG programs at Levels Part 1,2 and 3. And by doing so, they also define the learning process and objectives, the design briefs and outcomes, the assessment process and criteria[2]. Design studios are most affected, as their learning objectives are often literally mapped against ARB General Criteria (GCs). The ARB GCs are intimately linked to the 11 points of Article 46 of the Directive of Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications Directive [2005/36/EC][3], which translates and recognizes similar degrees across all EU states. EU Directive and ARB GCs condense the complex cosmos of architectural practice into a set of prescriptions that shape the cosmos of UK design education. The following passage looks at the cosmos and the bodies described in these directives and at how they silently shape the early years of architectural education.

2.1. The Cosmos of UK Accrediting Institutions

The GC1 synopsis makes implicit reference to the complex cosmos of architectural practice (construction/structure/environment/regulations) which is then presented in greater details in GC5 and GC6 general criteria. The world of practice is compressed in a series of concentric realms in the center of which lies the architect (design team | the construction industry | the built and natural environment | communities/society). These peripheries are then translated into learning objectives and development stages in studio briefs (site and context analysis, study of tectonic and construction principles, environmental considerations of safety and comfort, etc) In this frame, the design studios work as deductive models of the world of practice, simple and less constrained simulations of the complex design realms that novices will face later in the carriers.

> GC1 Ability to create architectural designs that satisfy both aesthetic and technical requirements...
> GC5 Understanding of the relationship between people and buildings, and between buildings and their environment, and the need to relate buildings and the spaces between them to human needs and scale...
> GC6 Understanding of the profession of architecture and the role of the architect in society, in particular in preparing briefs that take account of social factors.
> The graduate will have an understanding of:
> > .1 the nature of professionalism and the duties and responsibilities of architects to clients, building users, constructors, co-professionals and the wider society;
> > .2 the role of the architect within the design team and construction industry, recognising the importance of current methods and trends in the construction of the built environment;
> > .3 the potential impact of building projects on existing and proposed communities
> > (ARB 2010, 3,4,5)

---

[2] http://www.arb.org.uk/information-for-schools-of-architecture/arb-criteria/
[3] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/

2.2. The Bodies of UK Accrediting Institutions

In 2003, Rob Imrie was looking into the roles that the human body is given in the frame of UK architectural education and practice. Back then, practitioners and educators of architecture seemed to admit that while bodily proportions and scale played a key role in the design process, these bodies were primarily seen as standard and healthy ones. In contrast, Imrie was advocating in favor of a reflexive and open-minded architecture

> without boundaries or borders, and sensitised to the corporealities of the body. An important component of this is for architects to identify the multiplicity of corporeal or postural schemata of the body (Imrie 2003, 56)

But, discussion on the absence of a-typical, suppressed corporealities from architectural practice and education were not inaugurated by Imrie. They sprouted in the multiple human rights movements that rose in the 1960s and 70s and entered architectural education through the invaluable contribution of scholars like, Diana Agrest, Beatriz Colomina, Elisabeth Grosz, Denise Scott-Brown etc (Agrest 1988, Scott-Brown 1990, Colomina 1992, Grosz 1992). These critical discussions were thickly embedded in the political and social changes of the period and gave life to a wave of research projects that focused on 'other' bodies, frequently excluded from architectural debates but also from our design studios (Buse et al 2017). One would expect that these academic preoccupations would inevitable infiltrate institutional discourses and reshape educational priorities, but this was not exactly the case.

The bodies that students need to take into consideration by the end of their studies are clearly listed in ARB GC5 and 6. These are the bodies of the clients, users, constructors, co-professionals and wider society or communities. These bodies have admittedly *needs* and *aspirations*, but they are primarily plural and incidentally abstract. Their variety is a reference to the different professional roles they play in architectural production and less on their diverse corporealities (GC9 & GC10). This also confirmed by the fact that in the same GCs scale, comfort and safety are defined with reference to the environment and not to the user.

> GC9 Adequate knowledge of physical problems and technologies and the function of buildings so as to provide them with internal conditions of comfort and protection against the climate.
> The graduate will have knowledge of:
> .1 principles associated with designing optimum visual, thermal and acoustic environments;
> .2 systems for environmental comfort realised within relevant precepts of sustainable design;..
> GC10 The necessary design skills to meet building users' requirements within the constraints imposed by cost factors and building regulations…
> .3 prepare designs that will meet building users' requirements and comply with UK legislation, appropriate performance standards and health and safety requirements (ARB 2010, 5,6,7)

Regardless of how disconnected ARB general criteria seem from 20th and 21st century theoretical debates, architectural education has been quite responsive to them. Nowadays, 1st year design studios often set as an important learning objective to reconnect the human body to its cosmos, mainly from a phenomenological perspective as shared bibliographical references show[4]. Common ways to achieve this usually include:
- intuitive site analysis and explorations of architecture
- engagement with new art & crafts creative activities
- bodily surveys of architectural elements or spaces,
- studies of scale as proportion with reference to personalised figurines.
- the design of everyday objects, costumes and/or furniture.

In these initiations to embodied pedagogies, student bodies simultaneously perform as:
- novice artists and craftsmen/women, while training into new creative practices.

---

[4] The reading lists of 1st year design studios most often include references to G. Bachelard, J. Pallasmaa, J. Tanizaki, P.Zumthor, M.Pollan, etc.

- imaginary users, while building an empathetic understanding of the brief-given ones.

In 1st year design studios, student bodies are questioned, negotiated, extended and stretched to meet and challenge the boundaries of the cosmos of the design brief, of the design studio and of architectural practice. To help students manage these ontological challenges, the body of the student and that of the user often merge in that of a creative 'other', maker, an artist or a craftsman in the design briefs. These imaginary and complex creative bodies are often invented for the sake of similarity (the student and the client are both creative agents) and aim at supporting a self-referential and empathic understanding of the imaginary clients. Bodies engaging in complex creative activities seem less intimidating to design for, than aging, pregnant, transgender, demented, etc. bodies. These 'other' bodies will only rarely enter the 3rd and 4th-year studios, when students work on large-scale public programmes, and manage the needs of 'average' users and local communities. As a result, complexity, diversity and instability, (constitutive qualities of otherness/alterity) are then predominantly explored in history and theory modules and keep safe distance from the design studios.

3. Radical Otherness

The emphasis that 1st year design briefs often place in joining the creative body to cosmos are usually backed up with explicit or implicit references to phenomenological approaches. These often render discussions on supressed, a-canonical, 'other' bodies as less relevant. The problematic is also reflective of philosophical critiques to early and later phenomenological traditions (Husserl 1999, Merleau-Ponty 1962) initiated most famously by Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas & Smith 1999) and later by Cornilios Castoriadis (Castoriadis 1987), Jean Baudrillard & Marc Guillaume (Baudrillard & Guillaume 2008). From quite different angles, all previous thinkers highlight the need for an ontology of the other, the other not as the distorted reflection of the self, but as a novel way of being. Levinas will get to the point to suggest that early phenomenological approaches are the "imperialism of the same" (Reynold 2002 69). These ethical advocations of otherness undergo a radical shift in the hands of Castoriadis and Baudrillard. Castoriadis, in particular, speaks of a novel ontology, an ontology of the other, in which indeterminacy and novelty are tightly connected.

> Indeterminacy (If it does not simply signify our 'state of ignorance' or a 'statistical situation') has a precise meaning: No state of Being is such that renders impossible the emergence of other determinations than those already existing (Castoriadis 1997, 308).

For Castoriadis, being is a creative process that gives life to "infinite qualities and quantities of lifeforms". In this frame, Otherness is not a state of being, but a poietic process of alterity strongly connected to indeterminacy, novelty and originality.

> Otherness, as alterity, is not the unfolding of some "initial" scientific conditions, and the subsequent creation of 'matter-energy", but the emergence of novelty or, otherwise, of originality (Castoriadis 1987, 262)

These radical discussions of otherness do not simply redefine it as a reverse passage from the other to the self, but also allow us to rethink of the relationship of these 'other' bodies to the cosmos of architecture.

4. The Cosmos and Bodies of SKIN

In February 2016, 3 female design tutors (Aikaterini Antonopoulou, Sophia Banou and Dimitra Ntzani) designed a pedagogical experiment that aimed at re-introducing the question of *What Body* and *What Cosmos* in 1st and 2nd year architectural design studios. SKIN was developed and tested in the frame of the Innovative Learning Week, a festival of innovative learning practices funded by the University of Edinburgh. SKIN invited students to build a theoretical, practical and embodied understanding of 'otherness' by exploring how the latter is culturally, socially and spatially constructed.

SKIN's activities evolved across 2 days. The 1st day invited students to join an informal symposium on

'Otherness', where relative notions were NOT theoretically debated. By contrast, participants discussed otherness as portrayed in the arts, performances, movies, songs, architecture etc. Key references were noted on a social media platform especially designed for SKIN as a diary of its discussions[5]. These creative debates were then significantly enriched with references to personal experiences of otherness, temporary or permanent, initiated by bodily, spatial, cultural, social changes or developments. In preparation of this second part, various communities/groups of the University of Edinburgh, e.g. Feminist groups, the Disabled Staff Network, the Dementia Centre, the LGBT Edinburgh Community etc, were contacted, but also individuals who temporarily or permanently underwent 'othering' processes. The public call but also more personalised/group invitations brought together elderly students, feminist artists, afro-american students, students with movement impairment, students of diverse religious backgrounds, mother-students, etc.

With the 1st day working as a deep and demanding discussion on hard to define topics, the 2nd day used performance as a mean to trigger creativity and play. Participants reflected on conditions of otherness and tried to activate them during a costume making workshop. In the morning of the 2nd day, new skins were produced and tested. Participants then experienced university premises with their 'other' bodies exposing the inclusions and exclusions that university premises supported.

The overall effort peaked in closing reflective discussions, summarised in the following bullet points:
- The complexity of non-canonical bodies. A-canonical bodies are institutionally defined by particular qualities. However, bodies are constantly negotiated and shaped by multiple additional factors (e.g. educational and financial status, racial and gender characteristics, social and cultural context etc). Institutions treat otherness as a condition and define it through boundaries. However, reflection on personal experiences define it as a passage or liminal state of being.
- The spatial and temporal configurations of otherness. SKIN showed that ephemerality and indeterminacy are key conditions in understanding its needs and potentials. Otherness emerges as a mode of being in particular social and cultural settings and by modifying those, it may be enhanced or alleviated.
- The extended nature of otherness. A-canonical bodies are often signified by the various prosthesis (a wheelchair, a stick, a pair of glasses, a pushchair, a carer, high-heels, a wig, etc). As such otherness can also be seen as an extended state of being, which opens up new possibility to connect to the world.
- Otherness as novelty and intuition. Both qualities are highly valued in the design studios. All participants felt that otherness allowed them to interpret, react, intervene in the complex design realms in more intuitive, socially responsive, ethically weighted ways.
- Otherness was finally discussed as a passage to empathic design/thinking, but not on the basis of similarity. Empathic design should be seen as an other-directed process, established on shared context and narratives.

5. Otherness as a Threshold Concept and Troublesome Knowledge

Naïve in its conception and blunt in its realisation, SKIN opened a space to discuss and explore *Otherness* as a liminal state of being, the reverse passage from the other to the self, but also a *threshold pedagogical* concept.

> A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress (Meyer & Land 2003, 412)

In 2003, Ray Land and Jan H.F. Mayer opened a discussion on what they would later define as *threshold pedagogical concepts*. They suggested that threshold concepts can be:
- Transformative; they have the capacity to reconstruct the learner's identity and subjectivity.
- Memorable and ubiquitously present in later learning activities.
- Integrative and transgressive; as they unravel false predispositions about a discipline, and challenge disciplinary axioms or boundaries.
- Troublesome.

---

[5] https://skin-ilw.tumblr.com

This last characterisation is an intellectual loan from another article written by David Perkins in late 90s and in which the author defines certain kinds of knowledge as *troublesome*, that is

- alien (not genuinely embedded within the primary discipline),
- incoherent (conflicting with popular axioms or principles) and occasionally
- counterintuitive (reluctant to serve conventional disciplinary aims or to follow methodological conventions).

For Perkins, troublesome knowledges have the power to interrupt ritual ones, activate previously inert knowledges, and radically change the ways we think and work in the frame of our disciplines (Perkins 1999).

SKIN was awarded by the broader community of the University of Edinburgh with the 'Most Experimental' and the 'Ideas in Play' awards. But it also left its organisers and participants with the bitter taste of regret for opportunities lost in 1st year design brief and studios, to invent a space for Otherness. SKIN showed that in the early years of architectural education, otherness can work as a threshold concept that changes the way students perceive their own body and that of their users'. It provoked us to cross disciplinary boundaries, and question institutional convention of the profession. Last but not least, it invited us to think of empathic design as an other-directed process rather than as a self-referential one, or one based on similarity (Gallagher 2012).

So, if creative bodies allow us to challenge our boundaries with the complex cosmos we live in, bodies of alterity can introduce a new ontological perspective in architectural education, one in which, otherness, indeterminacy and novelty are closely affiliated. In this troublesome pedagogical frame, discussions on otherness can give life to new aesthetical/technological inventions, promote new disciplinary synergies, introduce creativity as an 'othering' process and otherness as a novel way of being.

Acknowledgements

References

[1] Agrest, D. I. "Architecture from without: Body, logic, and sex." Assemblage, 7(1988): 28-41.
[2] Bachelard, G. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press 1964.
[3] Baudrillard J. & M. Guillaume. *Radical Alterity*, trs A. Hodges. 2008 Semiotext: Los Angeles 2008.
[4] Bernet, R.: "Levinas's Critique of Husserl". In *The Cambridge Companion to Levina,* eds S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002. 82–99.
[5] Brown, D. S. (1990). "Room at the Top, Sexism and the Star System in Architecture." *Architectural Design*, 60 (1990):1-2.
[6] Castoriadis C. *The Imaginary Institution of Society, trn K. Blamey.* Polity Press: Cambridge UK, 1987.
[7] Castoriadis, C. *The Castoriadis Reader*, eds D.A. Curtis. Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford UK 1997.
[8] Clark, A., & D. Chalmers. "The extended mind". *Analysi*s, 58:1(1998), 7-19.
[9] Colomina, B. & J. Bloomer, J. *Sexuality & space.* Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 1992.
[10] Dewey, J. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books, 1980.
[11] Gallagher, S. "Empathy, simulation, and narrative." *Science in context,* 25:3((2012), 355-381.
[12] Grosz E. `"Bodies- cities." In *Sexuality and Space,* ed. B Colomina. Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 1992. pp 241-254
[13] Hackforth, R. (Ed.). *Plato: Phaedo*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge UK, 1972.
[14] Haraway, D. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist- Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
[15] Husserl, E. *The essential Husserl: Basic writings in transcendental phenomenology, ed by D.Welton*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1999.
[16] Imrie, R. "Architects' conceptions of the human body." Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 21 (2003):47-65
[17] Klein H.A. *The Science of Measurement: A Historical Survey*. New York: Dover Publication, 1974.
[18] Levinas, E. *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. by M. B. Smith. Athlone: London, 1999.
[19] Merleau-Ponty M. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge: London, 1962.
[20] Meyer, J. H. & R. Land, R. "Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning." Higher education, 49:3(2005), 373-388
[21] Pallasmaa J. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester: Wiley, 2005.
[22] Perkins, D. "The many faces of constructivism." Educational leadership, 57:3(1999), 6-11.

[23] Pollan, M. *"The Site" in A Place of My Own.* New York: Penguin Books, 2008.
[24] Pollio, V. *Vitruvius: the ten books on architecture*. Harvard university press: Harvard US, 1914.
[25] Reynolds, J. "Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and the Alterity of the Other." In *Symposium,* Vol. 6:1 (2002, April): 63-78.
[26]Tanizaki, J. *In Praise of Shadows*. London: Vintage, 2001.
[27] Vidler A, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely.* MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1999.
[28] Zumthor, P. *Thinking Architecture*. Birkhäuser, Basel, 2010.