

Reflections on my education in architecture

Kristin Utz



The author (second from right) with colleagues including recent graduates

I attended the University of Sydney 30 years ago, back when we lugged A1 portfolios around, drew with pens and wore army surplus rather than activewear. Looking back at that relatively short period in my life, I feel grateful and appreciative for my rich and multifaceted education. Learning to be good communicators, both visually and aurally, was a key component of the degree. Communications was a multisensory experience that included dissecting fish, life drawing and communing with nature. Fast forward to 2020: everyone draws on a laptop, there is no library in the building and 3D printers and laser cutters are used to make models – step aside, boomers. The profession is moving away from traditional practice, towards a more diverse, collaborative and multidisciplinary approach – and architectural education reflects this shift.

Over the last eight years, I have reconnected with life on campus, returning as a tutor and as the chair of the alumni association for the School of Architecture, Design and Planning at the University of Sydney. This has allowed me to connect with students, work with academics and university staff, engage with industry and meet many graduates who are contributing in their chosen fields, which include industries that didn't exist 30 years ago – sustainability, 3D visualisation, FX, UX design, product design and analytics. Career paths are no longer straight but often diverge in direction. A more integrative and agile approach to education has led to universities offering a much broader range of degrees, a dizzying array of opportunities for overseas study and increasing flexibility to defer or change courses.

While much has changed, the grounding principles of problem solving have not. We were taught to ignore preconceptions, research historic precedent, understand local climate, landscape and the environment culturally and scientifically, and to formulate a concept. This is otherwise known as 'creative thinking' – a highly sought-after skill in the workplace.

Drawing, painting and sculpture at the Tin Sheds have now been replaced by the DMaF Lab, where students jostle

for bookings to produce sophisticated models and projects exploring the myriad of possibilities for new materials and technology. I am amazed by how students are able to embrace new technology with ease and skill.

There was always healthy discourse among students and tutors. End-of-term crits were often gruelling and it was here that we learnt to fail as well as succeed. From these (sometimes bruising) experiences, we learnt resilience. Now, the combative approach of old has been replaced with a more supportive and caring learning environment that encourages diversity and supports a wider range of interests and talents. We are moving away from the culture of the 'heroic architect' toward a more environmentally aware, inclusive and socially responsible model of practice.

During the 80s there was a more even ratio of men to women studying architecture than previous decades, and a woman's ability and aspiration were never questioned. It was postgraduation that the rather bumpy road to equality became obvious and more difficult to navigate. This is changing with increasing numbers of women leading in our universities and professional bodies, but it continues to require action and further innovation to embrace diversity and take the profession forward.

I feel optimistic about the future of education in architecture. I have seen the passion and commitment of academic staff to the learning outcomes of students and in collaborating with the profession and other disciplines. It is vital that value is placed not only on offering quality in education but also in ensuring there are opportunities beyond university. In a time where tertiary education is no longer free, universities have a responsibility to help in the transition between education and career. The profession should be equally invested in collaborating to make this happen.

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