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Traversing the international rainbow of academia and architectural practice

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Abstract:
In the context of contemporary tertiary education immersed as such in internationalisation strategies and internationalised curricula, the cultivation and promotion of international awareness in Australian graduates can be expected to lead to desirable lifelong attributes. Consideration of the need to be prepared for a globalised professional and cultural climate is integral to sustaining and growing the future and the fortunes of many. For the architectural community, the combined phenomena of globalisation and internationalisation strategies herald implications for the education and professional preparation of architects which traverse academia and architectural practice. This paper presents the case for exploring potential benefits of establishing closer links between academia and architecture practice, discusses the relevance of international student practice experience for the twenty first century and looks at its role within an internationalised curriculum in preparing graduates for the future. Analysis of a survey of work experience as a component of Australian architecture courses is used to gauge the extent of current programs that seek to integrate the academic curriculum with practice experience, and the Deakin study (a work in progress) of architecture students in international practice contexts is presented as a vehicle for exploring the degree to which the combination of professional practice education and cultural experience may be beneficial to architecture students, academia and the profession more generally.
Traversing the international rainbow of academia and architectural practice

Introduction

In tandem with the globalisation phenomena, internationalisation is currently a priority in universities in Australia. A random comparative review showed alignment of the range of internationalisation initiatives reflected across sites, and a commonality of programs in place, including forms of Student Exchange, Study Abroad, Internships, industry placements, and international study tours ‘Teaching the global perspective’; ‘Recognising diversity’; ‘Developing international perspectives’ are terms used across institutions. What most appear to be grappling with are commitment and implementation of an internationalised curriculum. Actual enactment of internationalisation of curriculum might have something to do with the nine types of internationalised curricula outlined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). One site defined curriculum as:

...referring to both content i.e. skills, understandings and values, and the processes of teaching and learning and internationalisation as applying to both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of teaching and learning.

Interestingly, it was also noted that the presence of international topics in a syllabus is not guaranteed to generate international awareness or sensitivity among students. Studies of internationalisation, which have tended to focus on incoming international students, revealed issues of teaching and learning practices. These can be applied to bilateral perspectives, particularly, where they may broaden understanding of underpinning curriculum and assessment practices:

In times of global uncertainty, it is imperative that universities promote global understanding in order for graduates to be able to have skills, knowledge and attitudes required to operate successfully in an increasingly globalised world.

What must be distinguished here is the generation of international awareness in the academic sense and preparation for actually practicing internationally. In pragmatic terms, challenges and opportunities are weighed in favour of engaging with the globalised environment. Australia is a small market, and has a construction industry that is highly sensitive to changes in wider economic fortunes. The numbers of local architecture graduates produced will thus, in times of recession, go into oversupply with the kinds of adjustments that are unlikely to be made in advance by institutions or registration boards. The Asia-Pacific region alone is a vast market in which architects are presently in short supply (though this is not guaranteed to continue) and construction development is rapid and widespread.
As Paolo Tombesi notes:
   ...it is unlikely that anyone invited to the international construction party will be left
out of the professional bonanza generated by the explosion of urban demand in
developing economies, at least for the next ten or fifteen years.4

From a more critical perspective, engagement with international development brings its own questions,
and ones less likely to be asked by the industry in its enthusiastic rush to be involved in globalised
developments. For high-profile projects in particular, Kim Dovey observes that:

   Urban designers and architects are given a highly problematic, if not impossible task:
to reconcile the global/local tensions; to frame ‘public’ space under new forms of
private control; and to legitimate political authority in the face of an eroding
democracy. And then they must lend their signature to the project, certifying it as an
authentic work of art which rises above the imperatives of the market.5

This comment does not necessarily apply to all projects, but how often are such implications seriously
considered by architects themselves? Those involved in architectural practice are required to engage with
the architectural aspirations and needs of people from other cultures. This is apparent in building
construction being undertaken overseas, particularly in Asia and also in increasing numbers of temporary
and permanent immigrants from non-European backgrounds in Australia.

**Globalisation And Architecture**

The nature and evolution of architecture is transnational. In terms of buildings, globalisation implies the
appearance of generic building types such as office towers. The same journals are read across the globe.
Architects (and architecture students) have the same heroes, and are taught the same ways of making
architecture wherever they are located. Even such movements as neo-vernacularism might be seen as
global. In one sense they reassert local identity in the face of the international, but the ideas through which
this occurs are globally disseminated. There is no way of simply returning to an indigenous location-based
idea of architecture and the world. As Dovey suggests in his study of power and place:

   Globalisation creates conditions under which cities seeking global investment are
asked to suspend processes of democratic participation and to exclude public
scrutiny under the cover of commercial secrecy.6

Nor is globalised architecture new. The architecture of European colonialism and imperialism can be
considered as globalised. There are churches in Hanoi and Jakarta that closely resemble those in Paris
and Amsterdam. Town Halls in Singapore and Lagos were modelled in European antecedents, not local
traditions. The twentieth century saw a proliferation of internationalised architecture, most powerfully represented by the literally-named ‘international Style’ of globalised Modernism. Particularly in developing countries, its connotations of technological advancement and economic prosperity have been both convincingly sold and eagerly received.

However, not only have the theories and techniques of internationalised architecture spread but so has the globalised practice of architecture. From the grand nationalist projects such as Le Corbusier’s parliamentary complex at Chandigarh and Louis Kahn’s capitol at Dhaka to Maxwell Fry & Jane Drew’s encouragement of pan-tropical Modernism, the influence of (mostly Western) practices on the rest of the world have been profound. Buildings such as the 1998 Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur, and the 2004 Taipei 101, Taipei, highlight two things; the increasing ability of Asia to surpass in sheer size anything being constructed in the rest of the world, and the international nature of much of this construction. ‘It is however in Asia that globalised architecture is currently having its most dramatic impact.’

Wilkins and Tombesi illuminated globalisation in a 2005 issue of the Journal of Architectural Education, and aimed to have its readership ‘reflect on its impact on architecture and the building environment whilst laying out an agenda for related professional and scholarly action in the future’, and articulated globalisation in the varied context of architecture practice as associated with:

- a geographic growth in architectural practice and education markets,
- the establishment of international trade agreements,
- the development of truly international competition,
- and the demand for conformance and professional qualifications amongst regions.

This attention to globalisation is persistent and real, ‘...architectural debate should start addressing seriously the issue of globalisation in its various longer term components’. In addition to Service’s prophetic statement, ‘Much of tomorrow’s action will be outside Australia’, this forecast of the future is significant to Australian architects. In the last fifteen to twenty years, the industrious and enlightened have indeed set up overseas practices, developed multinational concerns, been busy making their presence and receiving prestigious respect from a global audience.

**Implications For Architecture Education**

The uptake of implications for architectural education has been less remarkable. Any discussion about how students might be prepared for international practice requires firstly some discussion of the role of the academy in preparation for the architectural workplace more broadly. Ironically, in a professional course
such as architecture, this effectively means the role of the academy in the more specific task of preparing graduates for the local workplace. As noted by Knox and Taylor:

\[\ldots\text{with professional registration and accreditation dominated as they are by organizations whose membership base and frame of reference are local firms, there are severe constraints on schools of architecture in providing curricula that prepare students for professional practice in a transnational rather than just a domestic arena.}^{12}\]

So let us deal with the domestic arena first. The sustainability of the profession is in a continual state of balance in terms of how education today meets the needs of the future. A challenge of some urgency is the need to prepare graduates to operate in an ever-changing professional climate tempered with a range of dynamic and contemporary phenomena that impact on architecture practice. Changes in philosophies of architecture education have evidenced its movement from an apprentice-based system towards one termed as ‘credentialisation’\(^{13}\) and has emerged as dominant (and virtually the only) paradigm. Essentially this has meant engagement with the academic institution and the traditions of apprenticeship and academic inquiry have had both a productive and at times, conflicting relationship ever since. The role of workplace experience in this is pivotal. If, as some argue, ‘professional development is something that can only realistically occur outside the academy’,\(^{14}\) then its provision within an overall architectural education would appear to be important. Evidence from graduates seems to bear this out. Advantages which have been described by participants range from:

- having an edge in the employment market, opportunity for skill and personality development including confidence, self esteem, and satisfaction from being able to contribute to real projects or situations, opportunity to build personal and professional networks, broaden knowledge - to appreciation and insight into the real world of one’s chosen discipline or simply the obtaining of ‘experience’.\(^{15}\)

So how is workplace experience actually handled by the Australian architectural education system? Analysis of a ‘Survey of Work Experience as a component of Australian Architecture Courses’\(^{16}\) undertaken to gauge the nature and type of current programs that seek to integrate the academic curriculum with practice experience suggests a fragmentary approach. Out of sixteen schools of architecture surveyed, six require practice experience as compulsory component and eight do not. Two schools were not approached and it was noted that there were cooperative courses operating. Whilst professional practice experience is not mandatory within the five-year architecture degree program in Australia (Professional practice experience is required prior to professional registration and accepted that this will generally occur post graduation), nevertheless, contradictions are apparent. The Architects
Accreditation Council of Australia currently permits individual policy regarding student practical experience, yet annual State Visiting Panel reports strenuously recommend to schools that do not offer formal opportunities for students to provide such experiences, as was the case at Deakin University. The prospect of internationalisation accentuates such a debate, and it is here that the Deakin experience with international workplace experience may be of wider benefit.

The Deakin Study

To explore the value and potential benefit of establishing closer links between academia and architecture practice in a contemporary globalised environment, the Deakin study (a work in progress) chooses to examine the value and relevance of international student practice experience for the twenty first century architecture education curriculum. Deakin’s work experience has two facets – one as a scholarship program and the other as an elective unit offering one credit point towards the degree. These opportunities are offered principally to students from level three upwards. Both are framed to complement Deakin’s set of core architecture practice units. Deakin University’s objective for internationalisation is based on the philosophy that:

learning in an overseas environment can be a transformative experience; that for many students, an international study experience is the most powerful means of demonstrating what internationalisation will mean in their future working lives; a period of overseas study will therefore be the principal aspect of internationalisation experienced by many students.17

The following extracts from students who successfully completed a period of international practice work experience provide insightful qualitative and feedback on their experiences:

The experience (three months) I had with my Malaysian host practice was a huge eye-opener and offered great insight into our global workforce that we now emerge into as graduates of Australian Universities.18

'The experience (twelve months) exposed me to architecture, building conditions and building practices that were vastly different to Australia, most of it due to the people having to make do with what they had. It made me think about the social responsibilities architects have. It has changed the way I think about architecture.'19

A preliminary evaluation indicated that students developed broader perspectives of the profession and the multitude of cultural contexts it could operate within from their experiences. They also developed aspects of professional and personal international perspectives:
Key learning experiences in the context of this evaluation represented personal as well as professional development attributes and placed emphasis on the cultivation of graduate attributes in terms of awareness, sensitivity, appreciation, and respect for the full context in which architecture and the practice of architecture occur. There was also the prospect of forming mutually beneficial international relations, and a way to pursue strategic alliances for economic gain.\textsuperscript{20}

The feedback indicated that actual experience in overseas practices offers the potential for both cultural and vocational development. In combination with Student Exchange and Study Abroad, the two other international programs currently in place at Deakin, both the architecture practice (international) scholarship and the elective unit foster the idea of exchanging knowledge and thinking beyond national boundaries. For the students involved, such experiences bring a realisation of the importance of engagement with global as well as local communities. Students not involved directly also benefit from the increased cultural awareness within the school community, facilitated through group projects with participants and other interactions. As well as understanding the functioning of an architectural practice, the individuals involved became immersed in the social workings of an unfamiliar environment. Sixteen years ago, in anticipation of the globalisation of architectural practice, a joint report of the Committee on the International Construction Industry of the Building Research Board and the Commission on Engineering and Technical Systems of the United States National Research Council, advised:

\begin{quote}
the need for students to acquire greater knowledge of foreign languages and to have a better idea of world geography, history, culture, and business practices . . . \textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

to deal with globalisation of the construction industry, and it would appear that these have all been encountered by the Deakin students involved to some degree.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The students in the Deakin study appear to have engaged with a currency of issues at a local professional and cultural level. They all worked for non Australian practices, under the direction of local practitioners. How these findings might lead to a more systematised international curriculum is unclear at this stage. Seemingly, there are several possible aims, but essentially it should identify ways in which future architects and others involved in building construction can become more culturally and spatially aware of extra-local perspectives and so become more able to engage in a changing international architectural environment. In Australian terms this means becoming particularly aware of these issues in relation to the Australasian region \textsuperscript{22} More broadly, an education that provides the opportunity of understanding architecture from alternate social and cultural perspectives is desirable, in order to assist both practitioners and academics to contribute positively to current Australian and international debates about
multiculturalism, identity and citizenship. Additionally, and not inconsequentially in the context of increasing competition for international student dollars, an internationalised curriculum should also allow the growing numbers of architectural students of Asian and other backgrounds in Australia to engage with their own architectural cultures and heritages as part of their studies.

The nature of professional education is that it has to both reflect and critique the realities of practice. Such an education has to provide the content that will satisfy the registration requirements of its locality. It also has to provide for the expectations of students who enter a vocational degree, namely that they will be prepared adequately for the professional environment for which they assume that the course will lead them. Thus, if the reality is that major opportunities in the field are in the international arena, an academy would be remiss of it not to prepare students for such an arena. However this does have to be qualified by the academy’s role as critic. Universities have a duty to be independent, to lead debate into alternatives and to explore and critique the status-quo in order to produce better results. The globalisation of architectural education, like any other trend, still needs to be thoroughly dissected for its implications, agendas and potential social and environmental pitfalls, as well as its promise of creative engagement and prosperity.

5 Ken Dovey, Framing Places Mediating Power in Built Form, Routledge, London, 1999 pp 161
6 Ken Dovey, Framing Places Mediating Power in Built Form, pp 159
9 Craig Wilkins and Paolo Tombesi, ‘Introduction’, pp 3-4
10 Paolo Tombesi, Architectural Feasts or Professional Feasts? A Double Perspective On The Bargains Of Globalization What Are The Opportunities And Potential Costs Of A Globalized Architectural Market?
16 The Royal Australian Institute of Architects Education Unit Survey of the Schools/Programs of Architecture in Australia, May 2001
18 David Lennex, student presentation to School, 2002, Nick Beattie International Practice Scholarship program, School of Architecture and Building, Deakin University
19 Jeremy Schluter, student presentation to School 2003, Nick Beattie International Practice Scholarship program, School of Architecture and Building, Deakin University