

transitioning

1.0

THE  
TRANSITION:  
THE CHOICE  
IS YOURS

‘PRACTICE’ IS DEFINED AS THE “customary performance of professional activities”,<sup>1</sup> as “action rather than thought or ideas”,<sup>2</sup> or used to describe “what actually happens, as opposed to what you think will happen”.<sup>3</sup>



These three definitions of practice – custom, action, and discrepancy – accurately describe the practice of architecture. An ancient custom whose norms and standards have been shaped over millennia. A realm where thought and exploration are often usurped by necessity and action. And where original intentions evolve and adapt daily, to the multiple forces of reality acting upon them.

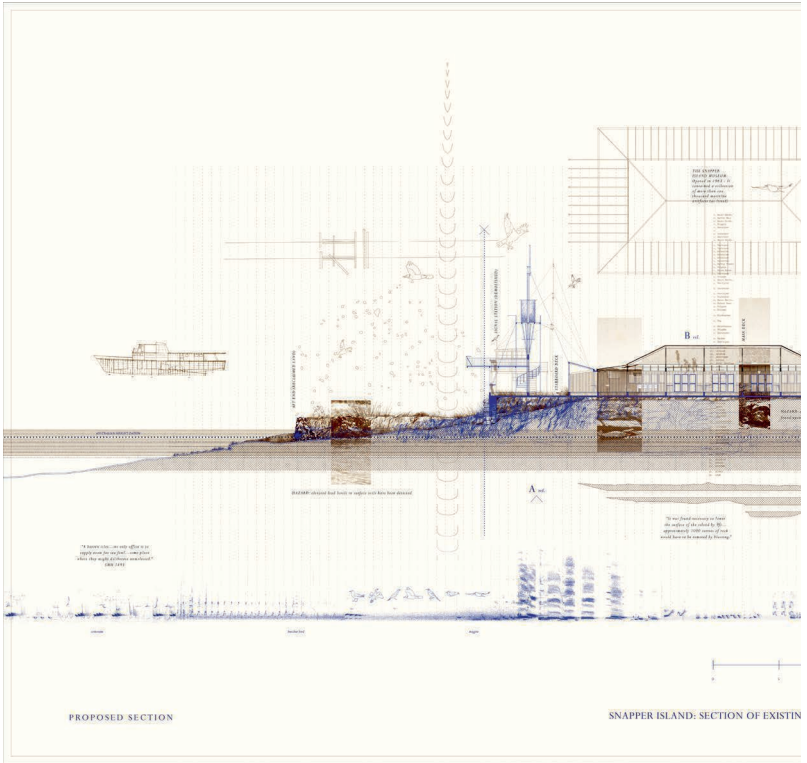
The core of architecture school is the design studio,<sup>4</sup> led by ‘units’ of architect-teachers who set hypothetical themes for students to explore, developing architectural design projects with an emphasis on artistry rather than practicality.<sup>5</sup> Methods of working are often frantic and intense, culminating in an endurance test called a ‘charrette’<sup>6</sup> of extended working through the night. The work is then exhibited and presented in a “trial by jury”,<sup>7</sup> where more experienced tutors and professionals critique the work on display. A system with an emphasis on competition, intensity, and individual expression.<sup>8</sup> If you recognise these aspects of architecture school, as I do, you recognise the hallmarks of an ‘Atelier’-type education modelled on the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup> The main objective of the *Beaux-Arts* system is in the “development of the artists’ personality”.<sup>10</sup>



### **THE ENVIRONMENT YOU ARE USED TO**

Crowded desks in the Yale Art and Architecture Building, littered with food, models, draft designs, and instruments of architectural design.

Photographer: Sage Ross.



## EXPLORATION IN EDUCATION

RIBA Silver Medal Winning Project, 2019.

Surface Tension: Blueprints for Observing Contamination in the Sydney Harbour Estuary. 2019. Victoria King.



Practice instead is primarily concerned with the collective *production* of architecture. Personal development is a side-effect. In architecture school design problems are often static and unambiguous,<sup>11</sup> in practice they are fluid and equivocal. In architecture school design projects are largely executed individually. In practice they are always carried out collectively with other architects and professionals. In architecture school projects are ideal – unsullied by the budgets, banality, and bureaucracy that can define them in practice. There are alternative systems of architectural education where the focus is less on nurturing the ‘genius’ of the individual,<sup>12</sup> and where real-life scenarios, live-builds, and more practical concerns are part of the curriculum,<sup>13</sup> but they remain alternative not convention.

Yet, architectural education should not mimic practice, as some would have it.<sup>14</sup> It should retain the ability to challenge and question the “hegemonic paradigm”<sup>15</sup> of practice. Concurrently, it is possible to learn the realities of practice on the job,<sup>16</sup> within the current post-university frameworks that are already established. What is critical, is that you are fully lucid and responsive to the discrepancy between the means and ends of the environment you are leaving, and the one you are entering.

This discrepancy is linked to the eternal distinction between thought and action. To manifest his or her thoughts the thinker must acquire practical skills;<sup>17</sup> the idea for a painting, is not a painting.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the artist, however, the architect does not directly manifest what he or she conceives. The distinction becomes sharper and more acute in architecture, when this task is outsourced to multiple different hands, many of whom are completely disconnected from the original thought process. Architectural practice then is the intermediary process between thought and action.

Converting thought into action presents a series of “dialectical dualities”<sup>19</sup> – between the instantaneity of thought against the protracted process of multiple actions; the needs of the individual and the collective; the competing aims of those creating architecture and those realising it; and the challenges of designing in a commercial context. It is within this commercial context that architectural practice needs to prove its worth to society.<sup>20</sup> Architecture expands beyond its basic role of providing shelter and space for human activity to become a productive construct. Evident in the fact that architecture is legally defined as a facet of the “creative economy”.<sup>21 22</sup> Through their creativity, or sometimes lack of it, architects add economic value.

In this commercial context architects have never cornered their market,<sup>23</sup> like other professionals. If an unregistered person assumed the role of a medical professional and performed surgery, a crime would have been committed.<sup>24</sup> When an unregistered person assumes the role of an architect and designs a building, it is entirely normal. It is estimated that around 75% of all buildings erected today<sup>25</sup> are done so without an architect’s involvement. The built environment in its totality is a “landscape almost entirely uninformed by the critical agendas or ideas of the discipline”.<sup>26</sup> The involvement of an architect can even seem as an impediment to the “blunt expediency”<sup>27</sup> of many buildings required to satisfy purely commercial needs. In many spheres of building today, design is dead.<sup>28</sup>



### **CREATIVE ECONOMY**

Architects are often restricted to finding “new expression to existing problems”.<sup>29</sup>

The Shed, New York. 2019. Diller Scofidio + Renfro / Rockwell Group.  
Photographer: Ajay Suresh.





### **DESIGN IS DEAD**

"A landscape almost entirely uninformed by the critical agendas or ideas of the discipline of architecture."

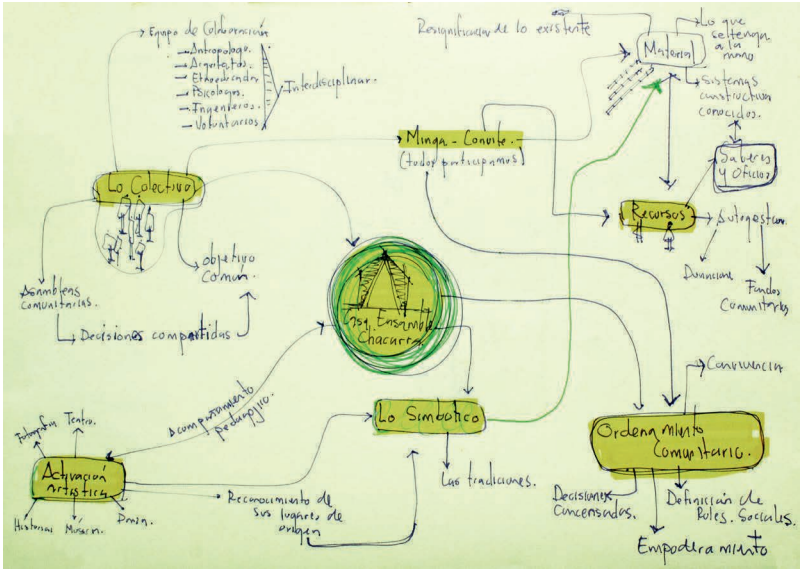
Urban sprawl. Las Vegas, Nevada. USA.

Photographer: Lynn Betts.

Architects have always been required to sell their dispensable wares,<sup>30</sup> forcing them into an “ever-renewed bargain with society”.<sup>31</sup> The practice of architecture becomes focused on the need to maintain and obtain commissions, each characterised by compromise and the acceptance of multiple realities. This societal bargain requires an organisational framework – architectural practice. Whether simple or complex, small or large, each practice is arranged to find a route to the optimum conditions for producing architecture. An arrangement typically formed around, then evolving according to, the commissions an office is engaged in designing. A framework created in pursuit of the elegant ideal, that “excellence produces beautiful deeds”.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, this *is* the ideal. The optimistic diagram scribbled out by the founding partners of your current or future place of employment. Not the reality of this diagram, in practice. The framework of architectural practice is tested on a daily basis by “much more instrumental demands, in which action is determined in reaction to the short term priorities of clients and the market”.<sup>33</sup> This imbalanced relationship can take its toll, not only on the ideal office structure and the employees that constitute it, but on what is created and produced too.

It is within this context that you embark on your journey from student to architect. Architecture school teaches you what architecture is. The first years in practice – how to produce the information required to create it. The progression to fully fledged architect – how to gain responsibility through the command and coordination of what architecture is and how it is produced. The sequential process of gaining knowledge, experience, and authority. The almost endless list of challenges and complexities that you will face on this journey – not encountered yet in architecture school – can appear overwhelming at the beginning of your professional career. You now need to understand these vicissitudes, to engage and grapple with them, even control them. This is for the sake of the integrity and quality of the built environment, of the architecture that you will be involved in creating, and the realisation of your own architectural ambition. Will your career be defined by “the daily realities of drudgery, impotence and insecurity”?<sup>34</sup> Or will it be defined by discovery, personal growth, and autonomy while working in close cooperation to further a common cause?<sup>35</sup> The choice is yours.



**UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITIES**

The Collective / Artistic Activation / Community Engagement / Resources / Symbiosis.

Casa Ensamble chacarrá, Pereira, Colombia. 2015. Ruta 4 Arquitectura.



## Notes

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- 9 Ibid.
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- 11 Ibid., p. 90.
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- 22 Florida, R., 2016. *Comparing the Creative Economies of Canada, the U.K., and the U.S.* [Online] Available at: <https://www.citylab.com/life/2016/04/how-do-the-worlds-top-creative-economies-stack-up/479022/> [Accessed 17 April 2020].
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# TECHNICAL ADVICE NOTE

01

## TERMINOLOGY



## project team

the multiple stakeholders, sponsors, clients, advisers, designers, cost consultants, project managers, contractors, suppliers, and construction workers involved in any one project.

## spec.

a specification - a set of written instructions prepared by designers to describe the materials, products, methods, and standards required in any project. They are usually cross referenced with drawings, models, schedules and bills of quantities.

## V.E.

'value engineering' proposes ways in which a design can be streamlined, made more efficient, or employ more economical materials in order to represent the best value for money for the client. Sometimes, it can also be used as a smokescreen to cheapen the building and maximise profit.

where invited or selected parties submit prices for the supply of material and services. The architects' information is crucial in defining the outcome of this process - describing the scale, complexity, layout, detail, materials and standards required in any project. Tenders are usually provided based on the bill of quantities, specification, and drawings.

## tender

a group of organisations or individuals who prepare designs for a construction project. Including architects, landscape architects, structural and services engineers, interior designers and a myriad of consultants (ecologists, acousticians, lighting designers, energy assessors, fire engineers, inclusivity designers etc.)

## design team

The process of transferring architectural proposals and information into accurate locations, dimensions, and levels on-site.

## setting out

a 'request for information' is used in a project to formally request that gaps in information are filled in, or any uncertainties clarified in order for the construction works to proceed correctly and timeously.

## R.F.I.

## bill of quantities

an itemised pricing document prepared by the Quantity Surveyor, itemising and pricing, the quality and quantity of material, works and standards of workmanship required for any construction project. Usually closely cross-referenced with the architects' drawings, specifications and schedules.

## co-ordination

the act of a design team checking for and rectifying clashes or conflicts between their respective information - architectural, structural, services etc. Usually carried out in the form of 'workshops' at each stage of a project to resolve any inconsistencies before construction.

## 'shop' drawing

a detailed fabrication drawing - prepared by the contractor, their sub-contractors, or suppliers - based on design team information. They provide detail on how the components of a building will be fabricated, assembled, and installed on-site, such as steelwork, staircases or windows. The design team typically review these drawings prior to manufacture.