

SOFT(ER)WARE OF ARCHITECTURE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

A B S T R A C T

Of the many lessons that the pandemic has taught us and brought into our personal and professional lives, the recognition of human agility and flexibility is possibly the least recognised, but most valuable.

Architecture courses, which traditionally apply practice-based pedagogy and foster studio-based learning, were the most reluctant to embrace the growing cohort of online and blended (or hybrid) model programmes. However, pandemic-induced circumstances found us, less than a week into lockdown, embracing the virtual world and carving our own spaces in its digital alcoves.

After two and a half semesters of exclusively teaching architecture and interior architecture remotely across a range of practical modules (from Studio to Architectural Representation), it became apparent that architecture was finally given the permission to become fluid and be interpreted through the tools which we still refer to as digital, thus distinguishing and removing them from the realities of their seamless, quiet integration to our everyday, physical lives.

On return to on-campus teaching, elements of the virtual practice became an established part of studio pedagogy, proving that remote learning is not only beneficial for providing access to knowledge, but also an instrument for conducting advanced layers of analysis, thinking and creativity. However, in bringing us together, the technology not only establishes itself as the (only) means, but also as a selector: qualifying participation based on connectivity and equipment quality.

SOFT(ER)WARE OF ARCHITECTURE

In a world of rapid changes and fleeting encounters, the pandemic created not only an unprecedented shock to the planetary existence in its entirety but forced a lived, immediate experience for all. Less than two years since the beginning of the outbreak, Baudrillard's¹ claim that 'time will never again be that of duration and that our only temporality is that of the accelerated cycle and of recycling'-recuperates. Alongside this, the anticipated end-of-geography,² probed as it has been by Mosco, has failed. The resurrection of the physical space, place, or location rendered the *image*, distinguishing singular presence and participation of an individual, every individual, in the redefined, albeit more inclusive, online world.

The abrupt ending of on-campus teaching took place in early March of 2020 across all third level institutions in Ireland. Although some discussions took place in the days before all staff and students were asked to work from home, the duration of the government-imposed lockdown and indeed the nature of exclusively remote delivery of the curriculum, left both staff and students entirely unprepared for the journey, which lasted almost three academic semesters, and has seen the completion of two academic years in online mode.

The particular circumstances of the pandemic in relation to public health guidance in Ireland rendered existing methodologies applied in remote learning and online programmes largely inapplicable. The trial of the myth of free online education accessible to all commenced. The context of studying in the early stages of the pandemic reflected the conditions otherwise recognised in the regional school: a large percentage of students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, which affects their living arrangements (shared rental accommodation with no space for drawing and model making set-up, the need to work while studying, lack of personal digital equipment). The Institute ordinarily provides dedicated studio spaces for each student, access to computer labs, library and printing facilities. However, during the pandemic, reduced mobility and closure of public institutions as well as retail outlets contributed to student's isolation from learning facilities, materials and tools; the instruction to stay at home for many students meant no access to dedicated work space, and exacerbated connectivity issues (although 92% of households are covered by internet connection in Ireland, in the west of the country, where the majority of our students population is from, that percentage is below 80, with accessibility to high-speed and stable connection far lower).³ Additionally, a number of students became carers for elderly or young members of the family, due to closures of day-care facilities in the country, which affected their routine and workload.

The first cohort of students affected by the pandemic had already completed seven out of twelve weeks of on-campus studies in the second semester, prior to moving to online mode. This was particularly relevant for first year students, who gained solid hand-drawing, physical model-making and basic digital representation skills before being asked to study online. Third year students were proficient digital-environment designers, with a tendency to depart from any physical engagement with design development beyond initial sketching, which for the first time served to their benefit. However, as more mature students with established work and familial commitments, their living circumstances were the worst affected, the results of which were evident in online student engagement.

THE WAY WE WERE - INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE STUDIO III

The Interior Architecture and Design (IAD) programme focuses an environmentally conscious approach to the re-use, re-imagination and innovative re-invention of the existing built environment, with a strong focus on sculpting interior space. Through interactions with live clients, sites and diverse design projects our students learn to position urgent stories in a coherent spatial and sociological narrative. Memory, identity and sense of place along with the intrinsic qualities of community and culture are explored and often juxtaposed with the global context, to inspire resonant, sensitive and rich design projects. Interior Architecture Studio is the core module, with semester-long project-based thematic briefs.

Interior Architecture Studio III is the award-year studio where a final project is developed. The studio brief undertakes in depth contextual research and the development of a cohesive response to the existing building and place. Typically, the research phase involves numerous site visits, and parallel desktop research of the locality, which is one of the reasons why a disused nineteenth century prison building in the vicinity of the campus, is used. The distinguished characteristic of interior architecture studio, when compared to architecture studio, is the importance of the site – problems are situated in existing structures, albeit often long disused and dilapidated. This means that the physical framework of a structure, a building or a ruin, has to be graspable in its limitations, aesthetic and atmospheric qualities, while equally encouraging and challenging. The selection of sites usually involves protected structures, and trains students to re-read and develop sensitive approach to re-invention of same.

Sligo Gaol (Jail) has a rich, documented, history. Its convenient location, both in terms of its proximity to campus and to town centre, allows students to conduct not only informal and individual site visits, but accidental analysis and observations of the building's participation in the everyday life of the town. Part of the building which contains prison cells has been closed off in recent years, as it became unsafe for visits due to dilapidation. This has since been compensated by visits to the remainder of the building/site, and the provision of a rich collection of photographs of the closed-off section from lecturers' own archive to students (Figure 1). The ground floor cells are visible through the windows, while an adjoining two-storey building comprising the kitchen and the courtyard remain available for visits, the latter requiring no prior or scheduled arrangements.



Fig. 1. Sligo Gaol at present (source: Yeats Academy of Art, Design and Architecture digital archive).

The second semester of the academic 2019/20 year commenced in January 2020, giving students time to complete site analysis and historical research, as well as numerous site visits, before the first government lockdown was announced in March. On Thursday, 12 March, academics were requested to work from home; the first staff online meeting was called for the following day via Microsoft Teams. IAD programme commenced online on Monday, 16 March, predominantly using Microsoft Teams platform, with no previous training or experience, and supplementing this with existing Moodle module content as well as relying on email as means of communication outside scheduled online classes.

It is interesting to observe the differences between the first group of students in their final project Studio, who attended on-campus studies in the first half of semester, thus having the opportunity to visit the location and carry out site analysis and other research, elements of which were conducted as group work, before switching to remote learning mode, and the second group, a year later, who have not had the opportunity to be on campus, or in town, and have not

had any opportunity to visit the location. Additionally, it may be of interest to note that the period from March to May 2020 was quite different in terms of the psychological reflection of the pandemic and the global transition and adaptation to ‘work from home’, ‘learn from home’ and various public health related government-imposed restrictions, together with the pandemic outlook, compared to the same period of 2021, by which time vaccine availability and greater clarity in messaging regarding the pandemic has made the global population in general become more optimistic about the future.

STUDIO SET IN STONE

Studio-based pedagogy has generally been adopted as the norm in architectural education throughout the last century, the argument behind this being that the strength of the diverse channels of communication, verbal, graphic and spatial, within the studio environment, offer a holistic and varied learning experience. Each mode of communication, often hard to distinguish or define as a result of the nature of the design process, the transmission and the development of which assumes parallel conveyance of representation and verbal explanation, occurs on various hierarchical levels. The range covers all forms of dialogues: from informal peer-to-peer discussions or feedback, to open discussions between lecturers or practitioners, its pace and direction changing rapidly and perpetually – as even the more formal ‘studio crit’ often departs into a discussion, the thread of which may entangle social or philosophical as much as technical or aspects of representation, concurrently. Owing to the complexity and uniqueness of the pedagogical process, the architectural studio format is still considered paramount, and inseparable from the open-ended task given to the group of students which invites complex considerations and arrival at the final, individual, design proposal within the specified time frame, usually a semester-long.

If we examine the historical development of architectural education, we can trace the origins of the studio to the seventeenth century, where practical architecture was taught in studios, evolving from the Renaissance guilds, but separate from theoretical elements which were part of academia. While the model was established at the *École de Beaux Arts* in Paris, where studios became incorporated in the school only in the second half of the nineteenth century, it is in the twentieth century Bauhaus that we see the first truly successful example of the integration of the professional workshop in the

academic education of architects. Its pedagogy was rooted in the traditional apprenticeship system, and proposed re-integrating technical and aesthetic issues through intense work in the production shop.⁴ In the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, design labs emerge, somewhat linked to the *model shop*, at the time, in traditional studio-based education. Model shops can, in turn, be seen as a separate element to the studio, but ordinarily assume integrated or extended studio work. The emergence of the design labs may be attributed to the technological advancements and availability of means for immediate production and prototyping, but their significant contribution lies in focusing scientific elements of architectural education, consequently impacting both aesthetic and technological standards- in the process. While nothing is novel in the suggestion that contemporary architecture is the product of new technologies, and that the ontological, often confrontational, relationship between the rational, metaphysical, solid and ambiguous in architecture remains open for theorisation, the experience of the pandemic may have clarified the blurred truth: ‘the forms and relationships established by architecture are distinguished from the strict forms of engineering with the assertion that in the latter, innovation is forever dictated by science and technology. Architecture, in contrast, for all that it learns from the engineers’ way of working, should seek a different role for itself: expression of the absolute.’⁵

STUDIES SENT TO AIR

Due to the abrupt shift to online studio sessions and prolonged uncertainty, the methodologies utilised and developed remained experimental and random, often responding to immediate, individualised, challenges. In reflection, the particular circumstance which enabled the online studio to function, especially evident in the case of the Interior Architecture Studio, where previously highlighted challenges in communicating the characteristics of an existing building in lieu of site visits, and expectations that the unseen and unexperienced building will be sensitively restored in students proposals, is that the on-campus studio with all its focus on tangible, physical model making, tactile and immediate analysis, and concretisations through graphics, actually only revolves around perceptions and interpretations. Furthermore, the design proposals from early conceptual stages to final submissions, as much as they are situated, remain abstract and fluctuate in the domain of the representation, as opposed to being present.

In 'Paradoxes of Appearing,' Olafur Eliason⁶ discusses his search for the form that has a potential to co-produce reality. His installations and architectural work draw from negotiations and frictions, and are propped by intangible relational set-ups - social, political, collective or individualised - to arrive at their physical appearance, while retaining the dichotomy of representation and reality. To address the outcome of his work, *reality* - a tangible component - is necessary. But this reality is elusive, fluctuating between the representation, illusion, and perception.

Architectural design proposals invert this approach. The physical spatial component is considered to be the factual, given and unquestionable reality. This is a consequence of the 'analysis' process, which does not account for the subjective and perceived, and overlooks the deceptive nature of photography. In the particular case of the Interior Architecture studio, this space being the ruin of the former jail building, the notion of the building is merely an illusion of the framework, the context of design considerations. Students have traditionally relied on frequent site visits and photographic records to develop their understanding of the structure, and supported with desktop research, they would produce a repertoire of conclusions in the forms of maps, diagrams and bullet points, but with implied factuality, the objectiveness of which would never be interrogated. The diversity of conclusions has always been present, but rather than recognising it to be the traitor of stability, which would be an excuse to query the methodology of research, it was attributed to students' individual interests or access to available documents.

If we observe the research element of the studio carried out by the group of students who have never physically visited the site, in the second semester of 2021, it is notable that the focus was on atmospheric, albeit imagined, qualities of the jail building. For them, the building is de-contextualised, despite elements of site analysis which would, at the minimum, consider the Sun path diagram for the specific location. The dark history and political significance of the jail, with its carcass unfortunately forgotten amid service yards and a fire station, are interpreted as a fictional narrative, the role of which is to induce students' conception. While this in itself may be an affirmative practice, it is the removal or the disappearance of the object of architectural intervention that stands out as a novelty.

Furthermore, the impact of the pandemic on mental health, the pressure created by the media and the challenging personal circumstances a number students

found themselves in, impacted their work. While this is true in terms of the quality and quantity of the output, it is interesting to analyse students' design concepts and their approach to the task. Traditionally, the task is to design a hotel with a specific functional determinant. In years preceding the pandemic, students would generally propose a museum element as part of the hotel's public domain and in response to the building's history, or alternatively include conventional wellness and spa facilities. While the majority of students in the year when pandemic started, proposed a spa hotel at the conceptual stage of the design, with one proposal considering the growing housing crisis in Ireland and consequently choosing co-living & co-working space as a theme, and one taking winery, the progress of design proposals in the circumstances of remote learning and the atmosphere of the lockdown, diverged from their initial understanding of the typologies.

While this process can be observed from the phenomenological point of view and is likely to be strongly related to the theory of imaginative experience,⁷ for the analysis of educational practice it may be enough to acknowledge the role of imaginative perception in understanding and interpreting of, as well as responding to, the object of the design. This is also where the role of remote learning, especially in its earliest stages, had a strong impact. As previously described, the sudden shift to online mode meant that the immediacy of multiple and successive means of communication, possible in the studio environment, became difficult and/or impossible in the online mode. The simplicity of producing sketches on a piece of paper in a studio, as a means of visually conveying an idea, required a considerable time and effort in online classrooms (e.g., producing a sketch, scanning or taking a photo of it, uploading to online classroom, sharing) and would often constitute a one-way conversation. Similarly, unlike in the studio environment where students would engage in work – drawing, model making – and the process could be supervised, the online mode allowed only for enquiry into selected elements of students' choice.

Conversely, the scarceness of materials around which the dialogue could be established, and the slower pace of the dialogue, but primarily the disappearance of the physical dimension across all levels, from the studio space, the space of the building in question, the spatial presence of a drawing or a model, all resulted in an emergence of an abstract environment where this altered design process could take place. While it may be premature to make conclusions, it is worth considering the possibility that the physical experience of the building hinders imaginative responses; or at least that in the absence of the physical experience,

the focus on the intangible qualities of the building strengthens. This could be an instinctive way to establish links to, or simply grasp, reality; or it may be a result of an attempt to overcompensate for the unseen and unexperienced. But it is equally likely that it proves that tangible reality is the means of architecture, rather than its condition.

‘A Hymn to Freedom & Rebellion’ is the title of the final project developed by Jasmine Lee, a third year student, whose proposal won the prestigious IDI Graduate Award.⁸ Drawing inspirations from the remnants of history and myth, Jasmine explored collective perceptions of historical buildings and their functional capacities, shifting the focus on the experiential and sensual components of space. She offered a vision of a dream-like ambiance which transcends temporal and dimensional frames, but which is, at the same time, incarcerated in the boundaries of human experience.

But as the online venue became a chaotic depository of media used and overlapped (Figure 2), the departure from the drawing conventions was insufficient. The vision which could only be betrayed by traditional drawing at the time when the digital domain appeared banal, perhaps caused by our prolonged residence in it during the pandemic, provoked students to wonder outside. Walking through the marvellous landscapes of imagination or memories, when the difference between virtual and real ceased, futuristic visions were created through historical references (Figure 3).

The following academic year, students were given the same task, with minor modifications to the design brief. The building was communicated to students, as previously noted, through repository of photographs and historical documents. This time, students were provided with a basic 3D model of the building. Once again, responses to the brief were more imaginative than in the years preceding the pandemic, but this time the students’ approach had a strong emotional component. From the early analysis stage, prisoners were recognised as victims of incarceration, their lives seen through the experience of the prison rather than the crime, and the analysis of the psychological impacts of incarceration became the departing points of the designs. The reason for this may lie in the endurance or reflections of the government lockdowns which in Ireland lasted from March 2020 until May 2021, with only two brief respite periods when the restrictions were eased or lifted. And yet again, the building became part of the imaginative response, rather than its boundary.



UP: Fig. 2. The sketch(es) produced in Studio as part of the discussions with student Jasmine Lee. Author's own hand drawn sketches are photographed using phone camera and uploaded; linear elements are subsequently added in digital environment using mouse as a drawing tool. (Source: author's own archive).

DOWN: Fig. 3. 'A Hymn to Freedom and Rebellion' - Jasmine Lee's final project design for Sligo Gaol Hotel 2021 (Source: courtesy of Jasmine Lee).

In their textual exposition – design statements, students were referring to the world(s) created in their minds as spaces of escapes from reality, recognising that the freedom of thought can be gained when the constraints of the real world are removed. These observations, important as the driving elements of students’ design concepts as well as their methodologies, could be the consequence or the imprints of the nature of the discipline of the Interior Architecture: the dynamics of the external vs. internal relationship. Additionally, there is a strong link between the psychological analysis or interpretations of the space, albeit intuitive, and the paradox of the creation of the space (interior) within a constituted space (existing structure/building). As Mark Wigley states: ‘...a spacing that at once subverts and produces a space, one that cannot simply be subjected to the logic of the house that depends on it’⁹ points to the distinguished possibility of an escape through internalisation. The difference here is the thinning of the envelope, that is the structure, which is traditionally assigned the dominance.

THE ETERNAL INCARCERATION

In the eighteenth century ‘Carceri d’Invenzione’, Piranesi may have surrendered to his alleged dark creative character, but the series is not about him.¹⁰ Rather, it depicts the space of imagination, where the impossible nature of an internalised exterior and surreal atmosphere of neither unfamiliar nor quite experienced, appears tangible. The scale is deceptive: the room may be the city. Despite the presence of human silhouettes which are situated in familiar architectural forms in proportion, our perception is trapped by the absurdity of the appearance. This does not prevent our bodies from entering into a relation with the depicted space and sense its atmosphere. But it does disrupt our corporeal experience of it.

The field of architecture has always equivocated its dimensionality. Architectural reality contradicts its concept, perpetually proving the complexity of the relationship between the actual and the possibility, often disguised as an intention. The spatial paradoxes of architectural atmospheres emerge from the fractures of virtualised realities, and the loops of visual transmutations. But the atmospheres, for lack of a better name, remain the cogent envoys of architectures – our residence in Carceri takes no interest in matters of the actual existence of depicted space(s).

And while architecture may be eternally confined to its physical representations, its value endures in its *other forms*.

THE PALPABLE DISTANCE

‘Architecture as mediation is rhetoric, the art of communication and eloquence.’¹¹

De Sola Morales

As history accelerates and futures age, we find ourselves moving ever faster through forms of existence. Our ability to move, to conquer distances, and to live transiently, as well as the sheer speed of it, quietly isolate us from tangible environments. Life before the pandemic was already unfolding in the virtual and in luring non-places.¹² The illusion of an image has been replaced by an illusion of a place. The world had to come to a halt to reveal the truth: the boundary between the real and the artificial has dissolved, and digital can no longer be distinguished from everyday existence. ‘The contemporary structure of representation is the product of an interlocking series of augmented conceptual and sensory frameworks that make the boundaries of our perception transitional and provisional rather than fixed and impermeable.’¹³

Architecture, as a form of communication, departed Cartesian space, but its relationship with the virtual realm is still understood as either a form of simulation or attributed to morphogenetic processes. But if we approach this from the opposite direction, we may find the architecture to be the mediator of the material embodiment of digitalisation. In either case, the presence of the multiple dialogue environments, as a consequence of the imperatives of the pandemic, may expand the enquiry into forms of existence and conditions of the disappearance, ultimately shifting the discourse from finite corporeal to endless. Where we are logging-on from became as irrelevant as it is fundamental, allowing us instant access and presence while constraining us into solitude and isolation. The human desire for equality in the cyberspace has been betrayed: by infrastructure as much as by established social and economic hierarchies. And the ‘place’ played a part in cyberspace, although this time taking the role of an ‘enabler’ and ‘identifier’ in the online space.

To the simulated normality of the moment, we bring the remnants of remote learning, the elements which permeated the meticulously defended territories of the physicality of the discipline. No briefs are printed, but rather uploaded; we discuss presentations shared via projectors and record debates. Hand sketching is broadcasted by means of visualisers, so that the discourse can be illustrated for all. And we come together, while maintaining the distance.

After several decades of designing digital architectural spatial experiences, the return to on-campus studio, after just over one year, felt strangely immaterial. The planet has been upturned, and as a consequence entered the fragile world of simulation, of our own making. What we have understood as controlled creation of illusion, became our only reality. And in it, all tangible distinctions became blurred – *all that is solid melted into air*.¹⁴

NOTES

- 1 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (the University of Michigan Press 1994), 64.
- 2 Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime* (The MIT Press 2004), 85.
- 3 Statistical data on internet connectivity in Ireland from the Central Statistics Office <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-isslh/informationstistics-households2019/householdinternetconnectivity/>
- 4 Gabriela Celani, "Digital Fabrication Laboratories: Pedagogy and Impacts on Architectural Education", *Nexus Network Journal* Vol.14 (Sept. 2012) 469–482 DOI 10.1007/s00004-012-0120-x.

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- 5 De Solà Morales analyses Le Corbusier's position, defining his "order of the universe" as the outcome of the mediation of architecture between techniques, images and the panorama that culture perpetually presents, Ignasi de Solà Morales, *Differences* (The MIT Press 1999) 119-120.
- 6 Frictional Encounters by Olafur Eliason in M.Asgaard Andersen, H.Oxvig, *Paradoxes of Appearing* (Lars Müller Publishing 2009), 130-147.
- 7 Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, (Princeton University Press 1980), 84.
- 8 The Institute of Designers in Ireland (IDI) recognises the best graduate designs in several categories, and hosts annual award ceremony.
- 9 Wigley observes the relationship between institutions, interior spaces and structures in *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (The MIT Press 1995), 160.
- 10 'Carceri d'Invenzione' (The Imaginary Prisons) is a series of etchings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi consisting of 14 plates, published in 1750.; republished as 16 plates (numbered and reworked) in 1761.
- 11 Ignasi de Solà Morales, *Differences* (The MIT Press 1999), 121.
- 12 Mark Auge, *Non-Places* (New York, Verso 1995).
- 13 R. Mackay, L. Pendrell, J. Trafford, *Speculative Aesthetics* (Falmouth, Urbanomic 2014), 5.
- 14 *All That is Solid Melts into Air - the Experience of Modernity*; is the title of book by Marshall Berman (London, Verso 2010).

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(MEKŠI) SOFTVER ARHITEKTURE. ISKUSTVA U NASTAVI UNUTRAŠNJE
ARHITEKTURE I DIZAJNA NA TEHNOLOŠKOM INSTITUTU SLIGO, IRSKA
Masa Ruane Bratusa

Od mnogih lekcija koje je pandemija donela u naš lični i profesionalni život, prepoznavanje ljudske agilnosti, fleksibilnosti i proaktivnosti je možda najmanje priznato, mada je ono najvrednije. Kursevi arhitekture, koji tradicionalno primenjuju pedagogiju zasnovanu na praksi i neguju učenje zasnovano na studiju, bili su najotporniji da se pridruže rastućoj kohorti onlajn i kombinovanih (ili hibridnih) modela programa. Međutim, okolnosti izazvane pandemijom zatekle su nas, nakon manje od nedelju dana u izolaciji, kako prihvatamo virtuelni svet i urezujemo sopstvene prostore u njegove digitalne niše.

Nakon dva i po semestra isključivo predavanja arhitekture i unutrašnje arhitekture na daljinu, kroz niz praktičnih modula (od studija do arhitektonskog predstavljanja), postalo je očigledno da je arhitektura konačno dobila dozvolu da postane fluidna i interpretirana kroz alate koje i dalje nazivamo digitalnim, čime ih razlikujemo i uklanjamo iz realnosti njihove besprekorne, tihe integracije u naš svakodnevni, fizički život.

Po povratku na nastavu na kampusu, elementi virtuelne prakse postali su deo pedagogije u studiju, dokazujući da učenje na daljinu nije samo korisno za obezbeđivanje pristupa znanju, već i instrument preko kojeg napredni slojevi analize, razmišljanja i kreativnosti mogu biti sprovedeni. Međutim, okupljajući nas, tehnologija ne samo da se uspostavlja kao (jedino) sredstvo već i kao selektor: kvalifikaciono učestvovanje na osnovu povezivosti i kvaliteta opreme.

KLJUČNE REČI: SOFTVER, DIGITALNI ALATI, REZILIJENTNOST, OBRAZOVANJE, POVEZIVOST
