

UN-WORKING

New Tactics for Architectural Pedagogy

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The word “university” is derived from the Latin *universitas*, meaning “the whole.”¹ Embodying this totalizing condition, the university is a spatial and pedagogical system that produces subjects and subjectivities, structuring forms of knowledge, life, and labor.² A space of power and of empowerment, the institution of learning enacts the ethos and agenda of its curricula, continuously shaping and distributing knowledge. As such, the curricular structure of the university is a particularly radical space for interrogation and offers a critical opportunity to lay bare the political and social dispositions of pedagogy.

Given architecture’s dual pedagogical orientation between professional practice and cultural criticism, the design of its curriculum is especially implicated in the equivalency between knowledge and power, culture and capital, labor and value. As costs of education rise, universities are increasingly pressured to make education a more agile and profitable business model, aligning pedagogy with a tech-centered and finance-focused market. Although these changes offer new spaces of opportunity for faculty and students, this appropriation of corporate tactics, commercial alliances, and entrepreneurial incubators explicitly ties pedagogy to capital without offering a critical counter narrative. How do we invent pedagogical tactics that counter what Gerald Raunig identified as the “neoliberal transformation of the universities,” radically realigning the industries of education and

imagining alternative landscapes for learning and political action?³ If universities are to undergo these structural shifts, the studio could support educational models that are an alternative to market-ready forms of self-valorization. Such curricula could emphasize how architecture can support new social conditions, political actions, ethical frames, labor models, and financial systems rather than being a passive frame for neoliberal paradigms. Through this continued commodification of architectural education (identified by Irene Sunwoo in her research on Alvin Boyarsky’s “market-place” unit system at the Architectural Association in London), institutions naturalize the competitive ecosystems of production within pedagogy.⁴ While the academic environment is still a space of freedom and exploration, this tendency increasingly aligns pedagogical frameworks with the demands of the market, adding substantial pressure to both institution and student. While this increasingly challenging condition—exacerbated by institutional pressures to broadcast architectural knowledge through massive open online courses (MOOC) and to perform on social media platforms—offers new potentials for inclusivity, dissemination, and transparency, the project exposed here, UN-WORKING, insists on a concomitant questioning of the institutional reproduction of this precarious and competitive mode of pedagogy and practice.

The studio model itself often functions as a proxy practice,

reproducing the power structures of owner and worker in an aggressive labor market. The traditional atelier-studio reifies and reinforces a cult of over-productivity, perpetuating the myth of individual authorship to accelerate expectations of work, heroic exhaustion, and self-exploitation. Students are encouraged to engage in their education on the market’s competitive terms, as “student-entrepreneurs,” which schools highlight to reinforce the image of a hyper-productive and hyper-creative studio culture to market themselves.⁵ These dominant models of labor and expectations of productivity without compensation transition seamlessly into professional architectural practice, perpetuating the cycle of precarity and overwork.

Can we overturn this myth of the architect as creative genius, reframing the student as a worker, a participant collectively at odds with an economic system that incentivizes precarity?⁶ We contend that if designers and design educators instead begin to frame building form as *labor form*—an embodiment of the temporal, cognitive, and material resources of the design process—then the architectural object itself can take on both a critical frame and a new value proposition. If the architectural curriculum expands to include explicit discussion, theorization, and assessment of its own labor production, it could change the parameters of critique toward a more politically conscious debate.

In a text published by the collaborative research project, *Radical*

Pedagogies, Beatriz Colomina writes, “Architecture pedagogy has always been a political act. It has never merely been a space of reflection, of training and rehearsal, but one of action, reaction and interaction.”⁷ Sharing this spirit, the UN-WORKING project used the workshop format to focus on these questions to enact new pedagogical paradigms within design education. Funded through the 2018–19 Equity Innovation Initiative at the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan, the authors designed the UN-WORKING project as three workshops—UN-WORKING WORK, UN-WORKING PLATFORM, and UN-WORKING SPACE—examining the reciprocity between architecture and labor, each with a different frame and format. Aligned with activist groups such as The Architecture Lobby, the workshops sought to develop pedagogical tactics to address how design education overlays with economies of production and institutionalizes precarity within the design field.

The term “un-working” (meaning *to undo work previously done or to promote the lack or absence of work*) calls for a redefinition of the means and methods by which architectural labor is produced. The concept of un-working, although negative in its construction, is optimistic in its approach, offering the possibility of unraveling and undoing, even making room for an ethos of praxis that more accurately responds to our current modes and expectations of practice. As architects, we can find solidarity in un-working, in working *less*, proposing a counter-austerity that combats the post-crisis mentality of ever-accelerating production.

Within the architectural academy, the workshop has emerged as a robust mechanism to test pedagogical methods for a new generation of critics and practitioners. Ungraded, informal, and temporally varied, the workshop serves as an experimental platform

outside curricular credit models, disrupting the institutionalized labor processes of studio production. Framed as conversations between architects, educators, theorists, historians, and most importantly students, the three UN-WORKING workshops centered on the status of architectural labor in the context of the studio model by problematizing our assumptions about work, our platforms for work, and our spaces of work.

Workshop 01: UN-WORKING WORK⁸

The first workshop took place in the fall of 2018. Framed as a series of four provocations followed by discussion with students, the invited workshop leaders, Peggy Deamer, Manuel Shvartzberg Carrió, Irene Sunwoo, and Claire Zimmerman, structured conversations to develop alternative criteria for valuing and theorizing labor form in architecture.

The four topics fell under the umbrella of *myth*, *format*, *content*, and *value*. The conversation around *myth*, led by Deamer, focused on reframing studio production as architectural work and developing practice models within the studio sequence that operate collectively rather than individually, reflecting new ideologies of authorship and collaboration. In the Sunwoo-led workshop interrogating *format*, participants discussed how architectural institutions, exhibitions, and publications constitute an ecosystem of production, dissemination, and often exploitation. Through an exhibition budget analysis, the exercise sought to demonstrate the ethics and economics of exhibition design, showing how architectural labor is habitually the most invisible and the least compensated item on the budget. In the *content* workshop, led by Shvartzberg Carrió, participants discussed the dangers of political neutrality in the studio syllabus. Using the example of Spanish municipal governing models, the workshop centered on new modes of collaborative discussion between designers, community leaders, and

governing bodies as a way to charge studio content with site-specific and politically relevant design agendas. In the Zimmerman-led *value* workshop, participants discussed how to embed the real costs of architectural labor into the historical reading of a building, expanding the architectural canon to include the economic and geopolitical contexts of construction costs, labor conditions, and material markets. Treating the syllabus itself as a space of critique and design, each workshop imagined new forms of collectivity, collaboration, and solidarity that could reflect and improve the increasingly precarious conditions of architectural production.

Workshop 02: UN-WORKING PLATFORM⁹

The second workshop took place in the winter of 2019 as a conversation between Keller Easterling and Douglas Spencer, followed by roundtable discussions with students. The workshop centered on how platforms of design—politically targeted, socially mediated, digitally cultivated, and financially motivated—are implicated in our built environment. Native to the rhetoric of digital production and sensibility, a platform is a place from which architects can imagine agencies and agilities with design education: a platform is a springboard, a plan of action, a constructed scheme or design. Investigating political, social, and technological platforms embedded in architectural pedagogy, how can we instrumentalize these fields of action for cooperation, criticality, humor, or even the immediate pragmatism of practice? For the workshop led by Easterling, students were asked to identify a platform of design—a software, standard, contract, incentive, policy, attitude, branding strategy, space, or organization—and imagine how to deploy disruptive scenarios through these platforms and their implicit agendas. For the workshop led by Spencer, students discussed the logistics of

labor systems, analyzing the flows of material goods, labor pools, and capital to apply pressure on these infrastructures of financial and social control. For both workshops, the central question was asking how architects could find agency within larger scales of techno-economic praxis.

Workshop 03: UN-WORKING SPACE¹⁰

The third workshop also took place in the winter of 2019 and was led by Francesco Marullo. Framed as a charrette, students designed a “Room for Thought,” imagining forms of asceticism that develop from the contemporary imbrication of life and work in today’s economies of immaterial labor. The proposals and discussion centered on analysis of the spatial realities of the cognitive precariat—including neo-cabanons, private sonic experiences, virtual gaming chambers, leisure enclosures, digital-domestic hybrids, and bare shelters—condensing these social and labor conditions into compact architectural objects. Students used the prompt to reimagine their own modes of living and working and to filter their studio projects through new spatial prototypes and labor critiques. The discussion sought to unpack the spatial and aesthetic conditions of contemporary lifestyle regimes and the attendant labor of both expression and production within the spaces of daily ritual, thus creating new domestic models for the gig-economy worker.

Conclusion

The discipline of architecture continuously struggles with the question, *Is architecture political?* We contend that the *labor* of architecture must be. This process of UN-WORKING must inevitably be followed by a RE-WORKING, to render these conditions visible and to participate in a more integrated infrastructure of pedagogy, production, and practice. The intention of the UN-WORKING project was to seed these

conversations into the discourse of the institutions of architecture, making issues of labor an innate consideration more actively built into the syllabus, curriculum, and pedagogical vision of architectural education. Critical to this agenda is the maintenance of these conversations, always making visible the often hidden labor of creative production.

Author Biographies

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Notes

- 1 This project was made possible by the 2018–19 Equity Innovation grant from the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan.
- 2 Gerald Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013): 40–52.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 4 Irene Sunwoo, “From the ‘Well-Laid Table’ to the ‘Market Place’: The Architectural Association Unit System,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 65, no. 2 (March 2012): 24–41.
- 5 Douglas Spencer, *The Architecture of Neoliberalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016): 128–37.
- 6 Peggy Deamer, “Work,” in “Money,” ed. James Andrachuk et al., special issue,

- 7 *Perspecta* 47 (2014): 28–40.
- 8 Beatriz Colomina and Evangelos Kotsioris, “The Radical Pedagogies Project,” insert in *Volume 45: Learning* (2015): 2.
- 9 UN-WORKING WORK, November 12, 2018, led by Brittany Utting and Daniel Jacobs, was funded by the 2018 Equity Innovation grant program of the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan.
- 10 UN-WORKING PLATFORM, January 28, 2019, led by Brittany Utting and Daniel Jacobs, was funded by the 2018 Equity Innovation grant program of the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan.