

Shifting Foundations: An analysis of the first-semester core studio at the Princeton School of Architecture

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The presence of a core studio sequence within Master of Architecture programs is commonplace. Given that an MArch is a professional degree, there is a required basis of universally agreed-upon "core" foundational knowledge that all graduating architects are required to have. Although national accrediting boards set requirements that the curricula for professional architecture programs must follow, there is a degree of leeway left to the discretion of the school to explore within the limits set forth. Rather than examining the history of how these rules and regulations changed over time, this research is instead interested in exploring the ways in which educators innovated and progressed the discipline from within these confines.

Architecture schools are dynamic and living things whose character is shaped by the students, faculty, and administrators that comprise it at a particular moment. Those who are familiar with architectural education and its history know that it is constantly reinventing itself, reflexively critiquing, and re-molding its ways of operating. The common mythological conception of Princeton (whether or not it is still true, or ever was) is that it is a school for academics—more likely to produce the next dean of a school than the architect of its

building—the curriculum is said to result in individual thinkers rather than practicing architects. Princeton's MArch program is one of the few in the US that only has a two-semester long core followed by three vertical design studios. By allowing students to move directly to vertical studios after their first year, along with the flexibility of choice in other course requirements and the open-ended nature of briefs, the education of no two students is the same. The overall flexibility and opportunity for personalization embedded into the program confronts the discipline with the question: what is, if anything, the required knowledge for the education of an architect?

What is core and who defines it?

ARC 501 at Princeton is the first core studio course that all Master of Architecture students take upon entering the program. Operating under the hypothesis that the syllabi would contain traces of the disciplinary or pedagogical shifts, I conducted a research project for a seminar with Eva Franch i Gilabert analyzing the ARC 501 syllabi archived at the SoA. The project traced key elements of the syllabi over the last 63 years, including the names and number of projects assigned, the textual and building references given, terminology used, and also

included interviews I conducted with faculty members who had either taught the course or who could speak about broader pedagogical shifts within the school. The collection of syllabi archived beginning when the school moved to its own building in 1963 presents a record of what each instructor thought were the most crucial skills and knowledge sets to be taught to students—the basis for the rest of their education.

Princeton has historically avoided the traditional concept of a “core.” For many years, 501 and 502 were not even regarded as “core” but were more modestly defined as “introductory” studios. Due to Princeton’s small size, only recently doubling its MArch class size from around 10 to 20 under the deanship of Mónica Ponce de León, there is less of a pressure to “institutionalize consistency” that is present at other schools.¹ If a school has a large class that needs to be separated into multiple core studios taught by different instructors coordinating across multiple semesters to make equitable experiences, then consistency needs to be codified into the course material itself. The core curriculum, therefore, cannot actually be understood as reflection of the institution, but is instead a reflection of the faculty who teach it. That is to say, “core”—commonly perceived to be a universally prescriptive leveler—is in Princeton’s case entirely ephemeral, specific, and dependent on the instructors who teach it.

Princeton further distinguishes itself with a tradition begun by Ralph Lerner, who joined the faculty in 1984 and became dean in 1989. Upon arriving at the school he began teaching ARC 501, and continued to teach the course eight times over his twelve-year deanship. This was a direct result of Lerner’s time at Cooper Union while under the deanship of John Hejduk, who believed that because core was the first course that a student encountered, and thereby established a school’s pedagogy, it should be taught by the dean.² This practice

was continued by Lerner’s successor in 2002, Stan Allen, also a graduate of the Cooper Union who taught core for eight out of the ten years of his deanship, as well as Mónica Ponce de León, the school’s current dean who has instead elected to teach the second-semester core studio, 502.

What should core teach?

In the interim between the deanships of Lerner and Allen, 501 was taught by Paul Lewis whose syllabus stands out as the one with the most projects—a grand total of eleven, resulting in roughly one per week of the semester. Prior to Lewis, it was typical for 501 to include three to five projects, with Lerner usually assigning four. Taking a closer look at his syllabus, the first heading reads “Efficiency Studio” in bolded letters. In the section below, titled “Framework,” it reads, “The projects for this semester will be galvanized by Efficiency. Efficiency is pervasive in contemporary architecture... Efficiency is seen as a moral imperative. Efficient design is equated with good design... Efficiency defines the production in an architectural studio—how much work in how little time.” A position on what is most crucial to the discipline is not only described in words but codified into the course schedule itself—reinforcing the same position within the singular document of the syllabus.

Once Allen took over, for the first time in the course’s history, the project titles defined on the syllabus were not longer descriptive names of the building assignment itself (for example, “Community Center in Trenton” or “New Graduate Student Housing,” as under Lerner) but began to pull from (or define) disciplinary terminology. The four project titles from the first syllabus were “Fields and Patterns,” “Movement,” and “Repetition, Multiplication, and Aggregation.” By Allen’s final iteration of the course, these naming conventions had been refined until the three main projects were

¹ In conversation with Paul Lewis.

² In conversation with Stan Allen.

titled, “Platform,” “Screen,” “Canopy.” For Allen, this project sequence was a way of working through the different elements of architecture sequentially with increasing levels of complexity—the platform was about a relationship to the ground and the definition of a site, the canopy about the tectonics within an expansive field, and the screen turned attention to enclosure and its relationship to porosity and reflectivity.³

3 In conversation with Stan Allen.

Allen described his position as such, “When I became Dean in 2002, it was really coming out of a period, particularly in the 1990s at Princeton, with a very strong history/theory culture in the school. To some extent, the design culture had been sort of pushed to the side. Part of this back to basics approach in first year studio was about rebuilding the design culture of the school—that you could communicate sophisticated ideas through the medium of design itself, without appealing to a kind of outside theoretical framework.”⁴ Allen’s desire as Dean to strengthen the school’s design program became legible in his syllabi for 501, with the word “design,” for example, being the first or second most-used word in six out of his eight syllabi. This legibility of a position confirms the importance of the syllabus as a record of how faculty members perceived the discipline in a particular moment, and what they considered to be most crucial to it.

4 In conversation with Stan Allen.

5 In conversation with Paul Lewis and Stan Allen.

Does core reflect broader shifts?

In the final year of Allen’s deanship, before the arrival of Alejandro Zaera-Polo as dean in 2012, Michael Meredith began teaching first-semester core. Under Meredith, 501 as a snapshot of the current state of the discipline took on new valence. The syllabus now included a five-paragraph preamble, not describing the course itself but Meredith’s take on the discipline as a way to frame the assignments to come. It states: “As of late we’ve witnessed a kind of return to the ‘real’ in

which the tangibly of the built trumps the speculation of the unbuilt, where discourse is trivial at best and where the representation of reality offers an irrefutable proof of concept... Architecture has become a kind of social science, embracing a facile mode of technological positivism in order to escape the uneasiness of cultural production.” He ends with the sentence, “We find ourselves in a moment after Architecture” signaling to the students that the discipline has ended before they have even begun.

In a certain sense, Meredith seems as invested himself in uncovering the answers to the questions he put forward for the students. He repositions the role of the professor from that of an instructor who imparts knowledge, to a collaborator who helps produce it. Similarly for Lewis and Allen, there was the consistent position that the studio should serve as an introduction to the concerns of the field, thereby providing enough knowledge for the students to be able to enter the disciplinary conversation while not prescribing what they must then say. They emphasized the teaching of tools and techniques that would allow students to craft arguments and articulate them through the medium of architecture.⁵ It seems that with Meredith’s syllabus, the definition of architecture is not what is being taught, but reflexively discovered through the progression of the course itself. The students are now folded into the process of determining the state of the discipline along with the instructor. Architecture is no longer being taught but defined.

What is the future of core?

The most recent shift in the 501 syllabus occurred in the fall of 2020, following a tumultuous and consequential year of Covid lockdowns and a resurgence of BLM protests. With the course now co-taught (a practice begun in 2017 between Meredith and Ellie Abrons, continued with Erin Besler from 2018 to 2020, and most

recently with Anda French) the opening sentences of the co-authored syllabus read, “The first-year studio is based upon looking, discussing, and making architecture together. Our focus is on the making of buildings. It will be an open, collaborative, and discursive process. We will share our experiences together... Our pedagogical goals are to design while thinking about buildings from/through multiple viewpoints, values and perspectives, as well as to be able to articulate design thinking.” For the first time, the word “together” became one of the most frequently used words in a syllabus, alongside “community” which had not been frequently used since Francisco Sanin and Anthony Vidler taught the course in 1992.

The emphasis on collaboration and building are clear, and the rumination on the current state of the discipline is replaced by a list of defined terms, with the invitation to “add or rewrite” at the top. This syllabus, in particular, reveals the ways in which the curriculum of 501 serves as the optimal reflecting device for the state of the discipline as seen through the eyes of the instructors. Through examining the archive of syllabi, the course showed itself to rarely remain static. Even if taught by the same professor year after year changes were introduced, reinforcing the conception that at Princeton core is anything but stable, consistent, and rigid. Given its tie to the instructor more so to any other (such as an institutional agenda or the criteria of an accrediting board), the course is free to be amenable to shifting conditions as they are perceived in real time.

In returning to the question of, “What is, if anything, the required knowledge for the education of an architect?” we perhaps realize that the inability to definitively state what constitutes this knowledge set is, in fact, its most crucial characteristic. The future role of the architect, existing within a world fraught with ecological, climatological, social, and economic

crises, is drastically shifting. Given the impossibility of knowing what exactly that role might be, only through a flexible and responsive pedagogy can we be confident that the discipline will be reactive enough to not only keep up with a changing world but anticipate it. The foundational knowledge of an architect must not only equip them to enter the field in its current state, but prepare them for an unknown future that they can add to, rewrite, and help shape.

Christina Moushoul obtained her Master of Architecture degree from Princeton University School of Architecture in 2022 where she won the Suzanne Kolarik Underwood Prize and the History and Theory Prize. She is a founding member of Office Party and a founding editor of the journal Party Planner. While at Princeton, Christina was an editor of Pidgin and a co-founder of Salon Series. Christina previously worked for the media artist Refik Anadol, serving as project manager and designer for WDCH Dreams and Das Paradies at the LA Phil. Her work currently focuses on alternative spaces of knowledge production, radical pedagogies, and media architectures.

A Note from the Author

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For an abridged version of the research project, which tracks key projects, texts, buildings, authors, architects, and words contained within the history of the ARC 501 syllabi, please see [HERE](#).