
COALITION BUILDING AND DISCOMFORT AS PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Innovative design solutions come from inclusive and diverse design teams (Page 2008). In this paper, I reflect on how such insights can be used in developing pedagogical approaches that use coalition building, knowledge translation between disciplines, and pedagogies of discomfort to foreground implicit biases impacting architectural practice and education. Based on interviews with educators thinking about the built environment, as well as Kevin Kumashiro's (2002) anti-oppressive education framework and Megan Boler's (1999) notion of a pedagogy of discomfort, and building on examples from queer and feminist educators, I suggest in this paper that the disruptive use of feelings and emotions in architectural education can prepare students for more collaborative and inclusive practices. Such discussions allow students to understand the impact of biases but also to think about tools to acknowledge and challenge inequity in the design of the built environment and in the design professions themselves.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration, at both the students and the educators level, can also create opportunities for coalition building, particularly in contexts where a limited number of faculty are explicitly discussing race, gender, disability, class, sexuality, or ethnicity in their teaching. Faculty members with diverse individual self-identifications can multiply their impact by working together to tackle the intersecting ways in which minoritized experiences are pushed aside in mainstream architecture discourses and education. They can also foreground their combined experiences as positive role models to create a constructive learning environment to address these issues, both within universities and directly in the community.

Keywords: Coalition Building, Pedagogy of Discomfort, Queer Pedagogy

Diverse design teams make for more inclusive, but also more innovative, design solutions (Page 2008). This diversity comes from both diverse professional backgrounds and diverse gender, race, ethnicity, class, dis/abled, and sexual identities. Accordingly, coalition building can help develop pedagogical approaches that use knowledge translation between disciplines to foreground implicit biases impacting architectural practice and education. Bringing together students from diverse disciplines—as well as educators and practitioners—can help them acknowledge the biases present in each discipline by highlighting how such biases often manifest themselves in different ways between disciplines. Such discussions allow students to understand the impact of biases, but also to think about tools to acknowledge and challenge inequity in the design of the built environment and in the design professions themselves. However, acknowledging these inequities and biases involves

emotional work that is rarely done in architectural education but is essential to reveal how individual and collective belief systems sustain oppressions.

This paper builds on ongoing research in which I interviewed fourteen queer and feminist educators between 2017 and 2020 to explore how they have sought to imagine modes of teaching that embrace queer and feminist ethics in both content and methods. These open discussions cover how queer and feminist thinking can impact design, but also how it shapes the way these educators teach, including the reception of their teachings by students and colleagues. Interviewees are from different disciplines involved in the design of the built environment in North America, Europe, and Australia; differences between their professional, institutional, and geographical contexts were often part of the discussions.¹ Importantly, many interviewees identified how the various disciplines in which they were involved navigated diversity and inclusion in very different ways, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality.

While they all self-identified an interest in queer and feminist approaches, they also all noted how thinking about gender and sexual orientation represented for them a call for a broader rethinking of how different elements of our identity intersect in our experience and use of space and how we can resist and reshape design norms to make our built environment more inclusive. This shared interest, however, can manifest in different ways: a focus on making visible the contribution of diverse people to the design professions; a challenge to ideological assumptions inscribed in pedagogical methods or in form and composition principles; or a close look at the occupation of space and human relations impacted by design. These varied strategies are presented here before a discussion of the challenges and difficulties of doing such work. Architecture and design present themselves as progressive professions but often ignore the difficult discussions that need to be had to make meaningful but realistic changes to our practices and pedagogies.

1. QUEER STRATEGIES IN DESIGN EDUCATION

Feminist architects and historians have explicitly addressed how architectural education needs to be reformed to acknowledge the gender relations framing the practice of design and, by extension, its pedagogies (see, for example, Weisman and Birkby 1983; Kingsley 1991; Ahrentzen and Anthony 1993; Groat 1993; Groat and Ahrentzen 1996; Anthony 2002; Zipf 2016; Lange and Scott 2017). In contrast, publications and exhibitions addressing queer space theory in design have been focused more on making visible queer figures, challenging traditional forms of architecture, and addressing how some spaces such as domestic spaces or public restrooms oppressed queer people (Vallerand 2020). In other fields, queer thinkers have specifically addressed the tensions brought by queer theory to education and pedagogy. For example, in the mid-1990s, the education scholar Deborah Britzman (1995, 152) identified two pedagogical stakes: “thinking ethically about what discourses of difference, choice, and visibility mean in classrooms, in pedagogy, and in how education can be thought about,” and “thinking through structures of disavowal within education, or the refusals . . . to engage a traumatic perception that produces the subject of difference as a disruption, as the outside to normalcy.” The education scholar Kevin Kumashiro (2002, 32–52) further developed these ideas to argue that an anti-oppressive education must address four perspectives, and, not surprisingly, these perspectives can be found in the strategies used by educators interviewed in this study.

First, we must educate for the Other by improving the experiences of students who are Othered or in some way oppressed in and by mainstream society (Kumashiro 2002, 32). Almost all interviewees stressed the importance of supporting minoritized students as a foundational step toward a more inclusive learning environment. Making sure that students stay mentally and physically healthy gives them the tools to become more engaged and to share with others outside of architecture their understanding of how the built environment can be oppressive. By extension, better encouraging all students—minoritized or not—to understand their body and self-identifications means helping them be more aware of how gender, sexuality, race, age, able-bodiedness, or class interact with space, but also of how norms structure the design professions.

Most interviewees felt more useful when supporting student initiatives than when taking the lead themselves, but also noted a feeling of responsibility to become role models and to create occasions for challenging the racialized, sexualized, and gendered assumptions of architecture and design schools. Becoming role models is, however, not without risks. Interviews have revealed that many North American educators who have attempted to integrate gender and sexuality issues in their studio teaching have faced strong negative pushback from students and colleagues, going as far as being the object of rumors originating from students. This seems particularly true for women in architecture programs, while planning and interior programs as well as programs outside of North America have been more welcoming.

Second, Kumashiro (2002, 39) stresses that we must educate about the Other by working against oppression through a focus on what all students—privileged and marginalized—know and should know about the Other. This aspect has been integral to efforts of feminist, racialized, or queer historians and designers who have focused on making visible how people of diverse identities have contributed to the design professions or how minorities have gained (limited) access to the profession. Developing a dialogue between the canon and hidden histories helps designers acknowledge the limits of their designs to maximize the possibilities offered, to multiply points of view. It opens the discipline not only to other disciplines but to multiple experiences of the built environment.

In addition to helping make minoritized students feel more welcome, the visibility and closeness of positive role models remains one of the most effective ways to transform society. However, this is much more difficult to achieve than it sounds, and experiences vary from one group to another. While a student told me one semester how important she felt my diversity and design seminar had been in changing her understanding of realities she did not know about, the experience the previous year was the complete opposite, with students every week resisting the topics discussed, even if they had deliberately chosen that class as an elective, forcing me on a weekly basis to struggle with trying to think and learn about their resistance. However, by the end of the semester, they all acknowledged that even though they still did not think that most of the arguments we discussed were valid, they were thankful for the occasion to discuss and be challenged in their beliefs. From an educator's point of view, as this group included students from diverse disciplines, the comparison between disciplines was a helpful tool in highlighting how many of the arguments were culturally constructed—in this case, through disciplinary culture.

Third, we must develop education models that are critical of privileging and Othering: educators and students need to examine not only how some groups and identities are Othered in society but also how some groups are privileged, as well as how this dual process is legitimized and maintained by social structures and competing ideologies (Kumashiro

2002, 44). In design, this is done, for example, by queer activists challenging the binary design—and regulations—of public restrooms (Sanders and Stryker 2016), or by feminist scholars questioning the focus on biography in traditional architectural history as a tool of power relations that does not acknowledge the important contributions of diverse groups of people outside of genius figures, almost all of whom are white straight cis men (Van Slyck 1992; Caine 1994).

Finally, according to Kumashiro (2002, 50–52), we must strive to formulate an education system that changes students and society. Oppression is produced when certain discourses are cited over and over; meaningful change thus requires becoming involved in altering the citational practices that reinforce these associations. The weight of tradition and the importance of studio culture makes this the hardest to achieve, but there have been efforts to rethink architecture school from a master and trainees model—with its implicit racial and gendered bias—toward a more collaborative one based on dialogue between instructors and students as well as with the communities and users for whom projects are designed.

The last two perspectives are visible, for example, in the desire of Jaffer Kolb, one of my interviewees, to make students challenge and subvert the educational framework they are going through and the profession they will enter (pers. comm., December 19, 2017), building on Jack Halberstam's (2011, 2, 88) notion of queer failure: "under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. [Failure is] a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline [and to recognize] that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent." This can be done by challenging what is traditionally seen as success in studio learning, such as producing overly polished presentations or superfluous diagrams, which Kolb sees as reinforcing pedagogical power dynamics that become embedded in the culture of the field. This makes students aware of the pressure that is put on them by design schools to produce large quantities of finished work, to work constantly on a project to the detriment of their health, and to lose connection with the outside world, despite the difficulty this presents for students who struggle with the idea that their "unfinished" projects could be less good than those of their colleagues in other studios. In my own teaching, I have asked students to reflect on their feelings in reaction to projects or readings, in addition to bringing them in direct contact with groups they might not know about. For example, students in an interior architecture studio were asked to expand a space for a queer anticolonial community group in Phoenix, Trans Queer Pueblo. As an educator, I thought the project was an important opportunity to bring together my expertise in queer and feminist studies with the TQ Pueblo's embodied experience as queer and racialized people. As part of the effort, students met with the group leaders and visited other spaces designed for homeless people. In both cases, they reacted very strongly emotionally, moved by the life stories of the people we met, but were also shocked by the spaces we visited and the resiliency of the users. Most importantly, they mentioned many times how they were learning very differently from the group's members, but they also struggled with the conflicting desire to fit within the traditional peer-reviewed framework of the design critique, despite my efforts to explain that the project should be developed for the community rather than for other designers.

These perspectives are also present in the desire of some educators to engage with communities to operationalize a belief in transforming the built environment and to create a

connection between this engagement and their classroom. For example, building on knowledge developed in their studio and seminar teaching, Lori Brown (2013; pers. comm., January 22, 2018) has been using feminist methodologies in the design of abortion clinics, while Joel Sanders, Susan Stryker, and Terry Kogan have created Stalled! to prototype gender-neutral restrooms (Sanders and Stryker 2016; Sanders 2017a, 2017b, 2018; pers. comm., November 7, 2017). Student groups and emerging practitioners have also expanded discussions held in schools to the public sphere. For example, QSPACE (2016)—which emerged from QSAPP at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation—has engaged public education to discuss the biopolitical framing of gender and sexuality in everyday spaces, such as thinking about homeless youth (pers. comm., June 16, 2017).

2. BROADENING OUR IMPACT

The strategies presented challenge normative assumptions that are rarely acknowledged in architecture. They contribute to making architecture and design education—and by extension, eventually the disciplines—more inclusive and knowledgeable about people and communities that are constantly being Othered by overwhelmingly represented majorities. Furthermore, they suggest a need for coalition building, recognizing both the differences and the communalities between different identities, between different disciplines.

In her call for a queer pedagogy, Britzman (1995, 152) notes that “the questions I raise about the possibility of articulating pedagogies that call into question the conceptual geography of normalization . . . require something larger than simply an acknowledgment of gay and lesbian subjects in educational studies. At the very least, what is required is an ethical project that begins to engage difference as the grounds of politicality and community.” The discipline of architecture (and its education) is still very much shaped by a desire for a single rational truth—exemplified by the focus on developing oral and visual strategies to “convince” someone of the quality of a project—that does not address the diversity of lived experiences. In my own experience teaching about diversity and design, I’ve had students challenge racialized or trans people’s claims for changes to the built environment; they argued, for example, that trans people’s requests for gender-neutral restrooms or the lasting impact of redlining were not based in any “empirical evidence.” When asked how the interview-based research they had to read or the numerous claims presented in media did not represent empirical evidence of the need to rethink public restrooms, some of the students argued that this evidence did not fit with a “truth” that could be shared by everyone in pursuit of a greater good in design. While not necessarily surprising, this again underlines the framework that shapes most design schools. The impulse is to aim for universalizing, normalcy-seeking solutions that let students—and later professionals—talk about “the public good” without realizing that there is a difference between their understanding of an issue and how users live this issue. Designing for diversity does not mean designing for diverse people; it means helping diverse people design for themselves.²

Architecture students’ reactions to discussions of gender and sexuality—and more broadly of identity-based issues—suggest a potential for seldom explored design pedagogies. In the late 1990s, Megan Boler (1999, 177) developed the idea of a pedagogy of discomfort to challenge how racism and sexism combine with “enlightened” thought and education structures by controlling emotion to maintain various forms of injustice. Her pedagogy of

discomfort is both an invitation to use critical inquiry to help students better understand the ways “emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see” and a call to expose students to the willingness to voluntarily ignore the impact of beliefs we inherited.

For Boler, this did not mean that teachers should seek to change students’ beliefs, but instead that they should challenge students to question their beliefs and emotional attachments to those beliefs to understand how their experience and values are shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts. As Boler (1999, 176) acknowledges, self-reflection often leads to strong emotional resistance—that is, discomfort—linked to “fears of losing [one’s] personal and cultural identities.” In a pedagogy of discomfort framework, teachers should encourage students to explore why they are feeling these emotions in relation to their beliefs. While some design pedagogies already encourage students to self-reflect, those reflections seldom address students’ emotional reactions to the project’s objectives, users’ life experiences, or their own experience of the topic explored. Students are too often taught to approach projects as neutral containers and their role as one of an outside observer coming to help shape the spatial needs of users, but the life experience of minoritized designers—and thus students—often conflicts with this status, sometimes with important personal impacts. However, changing this requires work to challenge long-ingrained pedagogical methods, particularly in studio settings. Educators feel great risks when doing so and do not always receive the support needed from colleagues and administrators. In that sense, a pedagogy of discomfort can be uneasy for students but also for instructors, raising the question of how we can productively navigate those risks, coming from both colleagues and students, so that we can broadly transform the way we design and discuss architecture.

Furthermore, in addition to students working together and preparing for more collaborative and inclusive practices, cross-disciplinary collaboration between teachers can create opportunities for coalition building, particularly in contexts where a limited number of faculty are explicitly discussing race, gender, disability, class, sexuality, or ethnicity in their teaching. Faculty members with diverse individual self-identifications can multiply their impact by working together to tackle the intersecting ways in which minoritized experiences are marginalized from mainstream architecture discourses and education. They can also foreground their combined experiences as positive role models to create constructive learning environments to address these issues. Cross-disciplinary practices in architecture are still disruptive, challenging the generalist and universalizing discourses that sustain much of architectural education.

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¹ Interviewees were chosen through an extensive literature review to identify a first series of educators who were then asked to suggest further names. Most interviewees, but not all, were native English speakers. Efforts were made to reach outside the Anglo-Saxon and Western spheres, but cultural and political contexts—including the institutional invisibility and repression of sexual diversity in many parts of the world—have meant that the topic has been absent from architectural discussions in many regions of world. For example, there is still almost no discussion of queer issues in French-speaking architectural theory and history.

² The Center for Urban Pedagogy and the Equity Collective (2015) created a short comic to address this issue. Here again, I witnessed pushbacks from some students and professionals in reaction to the the comic's challenge to assumptions about what is understood as community engagement.