The term ‘critical’ pervaded architectural theory and practice in the latter decades of the 20th century. Coined first by Marxist sociologist, Horkheimer, in the 1930s and taken up by literary theorists writing in Tel quel in the 1960s, critical theory made its way into architecture by the 1990s, challenging the ideological apparatuses that shaped disciplinary practices. Interdisciplinarity was a key mechanism for bringing a ‘critical outside’ to bear on spatial and environmental practices in architecture. Anthropology, philosophy, feminism and ecology all cast critical light onto the discipline, illuminating many of the shadows in which dogma, presumption and traditions of the Modern era lurked. The design studio was an important testing ground.

Over the same period integrated world capitalism has continued to flourish and we now find ourselves in a world that is thoroughly interconnected through trade, the internet and intercontinental travel. Universities around the world have become key nodes in the global flow of people and capital. Five million tertiary students were
enrolled in universities outside their home country in 2014, making up around a third of all students in Australia.

The rise of integrated world capitalism might appear to signal the end of the era of criticality. But this paper will argue that students bring with them perspectives that have the potential to bring new meaning to the term ‘critical outside’. While architects in the 1990s turned to other disciplinary perspectives to shed light on their disciplinary blind spots, the 21st century brings hybridity, ambivalence and difference (Bhabha) into the design studio itself.

This paper presents a strength-based pedagogical model for masters level design studio teaching that capitalises on the knowledge, motivations and often unrecognised criticality of international students. Students are both informed about and personally motivated by ecological, economic and political challenges they have witnessed in their home countries. Using two graduating design projects as case studies, this paper demonstrates pedagogical techniques including multi-scalar, critical mapping, collaboration and material thinking, that enable students to lead architecture into new lines of critical inquiry.

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