ONLINE EDUCATION: TEACHING IN A TIME OF CHANGE

• Paper / Proposal Title:

Toward a New Present in Architectural Education: Looking Back to the 1960s and 1970s Avant-Garde for Introductory Design Studio Teaching

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• Abstract (300 words):

A transition to online architectural education has spurred pedagogical innovations worldwide, yet graduate students with no formal background in architecture continue to present unique challenges. They must remotely and individually establish entirely new working methods. We postulate that speculative architecture has the capacity to critically engage such students while also suggesting a new ‘present’ in architectural education. In particular, we argue that online teaching in our time of sociopolitical turbulence presents a resonance with 1960s and 1970s Avant-garde speculative practices which can have a new-found potency within introductory design studios.

The findings draw from a Fall 2020 first-year M.Arch studio in which students established novel architectural approaches integrating public health, economic recovery, and social inclusivity. Students established software literacy, mastered architectural conventions, and honed their iterative thinking. Inspiration for working methods were drawn from the highly speculative and radical design approaches of collectives like Archigram, Ant Farm, Haus-Rucker-Co, and the Situationist International.
For the course, students were mailed kits containing found objects, comic books, x-rays, and excerpts from Octavia’s Brood, a collection of social justice science fiction inspired by the work of Octavia Butler. Students composed these items into abstract forms, facilitating their design explorations. They thus began their journey into architecture with a clear sense of their own political agency alongside a desire to position their work as radical alternatives to the confines of this pandemic. Students worked across scales, considering design implications from the nano-scale of pathogen transmission to the macro-scale of collectively mobilized urban responses. Their work addressed everything from dating amidst COVID-19 to the rise in need for blood donor services. It suggested ways to bolster public life during the pandemic while still protecting individual bodies. Overall, this paper presents several ways speculative design through online learning can improve pedagogy for new architecture graduate students.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Zach Colbert is an award-winning architect and is a licensed practitioner in the Canadian province of Ontario and the U.S. states of New York and Arizona. He is an Assistant Professor and Associate Director at the Carleton University Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism, principal of Zachary Colbert Architects, and he is a member of the Ontario Association of Architects, the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, the American Institute of Architects, the Ottawa Regional Society of Architects and a board officer of the Urban Land Institute. He was previously on faculty at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) and the Parsons New School for Design School of Constructed Environments. His work has been featured in Art Forum, Architect, Canadian Architect, Architectural Record, Raven, GOOD and URBAN magazines and showcased in galleries and museums in New York City, Los Angeles, Dubai, Santiago de Chile, Rotterdam, Ottawa and Beijing. Prior to practicing independently, he worked for SHoP Architects and Bernard Tschumi Architects in New York City. His externally funded research program at Carleton focuses on using architectural thinking to productively engage intersections of politics and infrastructure within a changing climate.

Suzanne Harris-Brandts is Assistant Professor of Architecture and Urbanism at Carleton University where she teaches in the graduate and undergraduate programs. She is also a licensed architect with the Ontario Association of Architects, certified LEED AP BD+C, and co-founder of Collective Domain, a practice for spatial analysis, urban activism, architecture, and media in the public interest. Her research brings together design and the social sciences to explore issues of power, equity, and collective identity in the built environment. It covers topics as broad spanning as iconic city building, incentivized urbanism, contested place meanings, and design’s relationship to conflict-induced displacement—often foregrounding the role of designer agency. Harris-Brandts has led several large-scale international projects funded by organizations such as the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Open Society Foundation, SSHRC, Aga Khan Foundation, and Association for Slavic, East European & Eurasian Studies (ASEEES). She holds a PhD in Urban and Regional Studies from MIT and a Master of Architecture and Honors Bachelor of Architectural Studies from the University of Waterloo. She has over a decade of international experience at design-research firms, including in Toronto, Vancouver, the West Bank, London, and Abu Dhabi.
Maya Jarrah is a Studio Teaching Fellow at Carleton University, where she has recently completed her Master of Architecture degree. Her thesis Against Gravity: An Exploration in Post-Conflict Aleppo, explored ways in which designers could instrumentalize architecture as a tool to bring back joy and lightness to a post-war context, contributing to the re-emergence of the social and urban fabric of the city. Before moving to Canada, she worked at one of Germany’s leading architecture and design firms, where she contributed to multiple phases of local and international projects like the new stock exchange building in Tehran and a residential-commercial ensemble in Frankfurt.