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The Analytics of Power: Re-presenting the Design Jury

Helena Webster

Abstract
There can be little argument that the design jury features as a key symbolic event in the education of the architect. However, whilst the centrality of the design jury as a site for learning disciplinary skills, beliefs and values is now widely acknowledged, there continues to be considerable disagreement about what is learnt and how. While critical pedagogues argue that the design jury is a critic-centered ritual that coerces students into conforming to hegemonic notions of professional identity, the more commonly held conception is that the jury is a student-centered event that supports students in the construction of their own architectural identities. This article, inspired by Michel Foucault’s studies of relationship between power and the formation of the modern self, reports on the findings of a yearlong ethnographic study carried out in one British school of architecture. The research sought to unravel the complexities of the design jury as a site of dichotomous power relations and the findings bring into question the efficacy of the design jury as a ritual that supports useful learning. The article concludes by proposing that the design jury is replaced by a new set of pedagogic events that are carefully constructed to support student learning.

Researching the Design Jury
Although Michel Foucault’s writings did not focus on education in any detail he repeatedly mentioned educational institutions as sites par excellence for the creation of the modern subject. As some of the new nineteenth-century institutions of power, Foucault inferred that schools, colleges and universities employed the generic ‘micro-technologies of power’ (‘surveillance’, ‘normalization’ and ‘examination’) to transform subjects from one state to another. By extension it seems entirely plausible to conceive of architectural education as a set of contingencies: regulations, spatial organizations, pedagogic encounters, etc, that work on students over a period of time to socialize and acculturate them into ‘architects’. However, as numerous commentators from Reyner Banham to
Jeremy Till have pointed out, architectural education is a bit like a ‘black box’ in so far as students enter as laypersons and exit as architects, but what happens within the black box is little understood. Unraveling all the mysteries of the black box was beyond the scope of this study. However, the design jury, a key pedagogic event in architectural education, seemed to offer an anthropological window into the black box that might reveal at least some of its secrets.

Any research project that hopes to provide a detailed and nuanced picture of real events has to focus on a small sample. In this case the researcher looked at design juries in one British school of architecture. The school, housing about five hundred students, offered both undergraduate and postgraduate programs within which design formed the integrating curriculum ‘core’. The school also operated a lively design atelier system that resulted in students being exposed to a highly diverse range of architectural paradigms. The design jury was used throughout the school for formative feedback at the end of every design project and often involved external critics, whereas summative assessment was carried out through portfolio examination at the end of each academic year. Thus, the design jury figured as a key pedagogic event in the school and students experienced the event repeatedly throughout their five years of full-time architectural education.

The cross-sectional case study was carried out over a period of one year and utilized ethnographic-type research tools to access authentic student and critic experiences. The researcher observed (as a non-participant) three juries from the first, third and sixth years (involving a total of sixty students) and carried out pre- and post-jury semi-structured interviews with three students from each jury (a total of twenty seven students). The researcher also interviewed a number of critics involved in the juries that were observed. Other contextual data was obtained from documents such as the student program handbooks, design briefs and written feedback sheets. The aim was to collect data that allowed comparison between the reified, observed, and lived accounts of each jury that would, through detailed analysis, allow a new, more nuanced, reading of the design jury.
The Design Jury Ritual

Interviews with students and critics produced a picture of the design jury as a stable and highly valued ritual in the school whose purpose and practices were commonly understood. Verbal descriptions aligned closely with the reified accounts in student program handbooks and the school’s Jury Guide, in suggesting that the jury was a formalized event, consisting of distinctive discursive and non-discursive practices, for collective celebration of the end of a design project and to provide students with individual feedback from expert critics on their design projects, although institutional memory vaguely recalled that the present jury system had evolved from a system of assessment by proxy introduced in the nineteenth-century École des Beaux Arts. Yet, while the design jury was certainly ‘understood’ as an individual and collective learning event by the school community, the research findings suggested a considerable degree of mis-recognition. The data emerging from observations and interviews suggested that, rather than a simple pedagogic event that allowed students to reflect on the quality of their designs with expert others (resulting in deep transformative learning), the design jury’s ritualistic practices had the effect of objectifying a power differential between critic and student, and that this asymmetry of power profoundly distorted the pedagogic outcomes. Just how this power differential was constructed and its effect on the student learning experience will be explored in detail below.

The Staging of Power/Authority

Observations of both student preparations for juries and the jury events themselves revealed that many of the practices that constituted the jury system served as powerful socializing tools in and of themselves. For instance, the long hours of preparations before the jury had the effect of socializing the students into the long-hours culture and ‘total’ vocational commitment. In addition, and more clandestinely, the jury practices were found to construct a symbolic differentiation between those who embodied disciplinary ‘truth’: the critics, and those who aspired to embody the ‘truth’: the students. This asymmetrical construction of power was seen to be effected in the following ways:
**Periodicity:** The perception of the jury as a legitimate and ‘natural’ part of the passage from novice to expert, fuelled by ‘folklore’ stories such as Mies van der Rohe ripping students’ drawings off the walls and students’ own experiences of juries occurring at the end of every design project, had the effect of building up and legitimizing the symbolic power and authority of ‘the critic’.

**Constituency:** The specially constituted group of external critics, usually drawn from internal and external academics and practicing architects, were perceived by both tutors and staff as representing the values of the external architectural world and, as such, their role was to legitimize the work of both the individual student and the ateliers’ work in general.  

**Spatiality:** The spatial configuration of the jury event reinforced the symbolic power of the critics. Although most of the juries observed were held in design studios, as opposed to special jury rooms, in all cases a distinctive formal spatiality was created through the arrangement of chairs. Chairs would be placed in a fanning arch in front of the work of each student to be reviewed with the front row of chairs being “understood” as designated for the critics and the rows behind for the student’s peers. This directionality and hierarchical assignment of chairs, which one-third year student said ‘puts you on public display – it’s a scary thing because you are so open’, clearly spatialized the symbolic power of the critics.

**Choreography:** The choreographic pattern of all the juries observed involved a sequence of individual student presentation followed by critic response. This sequence of defense followed by interrogation ascribed the power of ‘judgment’ to the critics. Although the student being reviewed and the student audience were often encouraged by the critics to join in the post-presentation discussions they rarely did so. In the final part of the jury event, that occurred after all the students had had their work reviewed, critics provided a ‘summing up’ providing the design tutors and students of the atelier with a view of the strengths and weaknesses of their collective work. Thus the critics were given the power to ‘judge’ the currency of the atelier’s work within the contemporary discourse of architecture.
Language: Architectural discourse works through special drawn and oral codes. These codes are more than technical terms or methods of representation; they are akin to a private language. So, to communicate effectively in a jury situation participants had to be conversant with the atelier’s distinctive discourse. Thus the symbolic power of the critics was signaled by their ability to ‘talk the talk’ and their right to define the words that can be used to describe and define architecture.

Thus far the research findings suggested that the non-discursive tendencies of the design juries studied (periodicity, constituency, spatiality, choreography, language) served to objectify both the symbolic power of the critics and the powerlessness of the students: a kind of ‘staging’ of power. By extension, it would seem plausible to suggest, as previous critical readings of the design jury have done, that such a ‘staging’ allows critics to exercise the power bestowed on them to judge student performance against, and steer students’ development towards, the critics’ personal paradigms of disciplinary identity.\(^{11}\) However, such a homogeneous model fails to acknowledge that subjects, both critics and students, bring their own histories to the pedagogic encounter and this results in a set of unique actions and reactions. If the temptation to sift the research data for examples of coercion and sublimation is resisted, a more nuanced picture of the dynamics of power emerges.

The Performance of Power/Authority

Although the notion of the critic as ‘hegemonic overlord,’ that is present in some of the writings associated with Critical Pedagogy, is clearly over simplistic it does not mean that this model of action did not exist. Indeed, the researcher often found a startling schism between the official, or declared, intentions of the critics and their actions.\(^{12}\) Whilst the critics, without exception, insisted that their role was to support student learning through a reflective dialogue, thus helping students to develop their own notion of architecture within the accepted bounds of the discipline rather than to judge or direct students, the evidence provided by the observations suggested the reverse was generally true.\(^{13}\) Yet, critics were not entirely consistent either in the way they exercised their symbolic power or in the scope of their concern. For instance, almost without exception, critics were observed suppressing
their symbolic power when reviewing the work of the best students, those who already possessed an architectural identity or ‘feeling for the game’ that included particular constructions of knowledge, skills, deportment, linguistic and graphic acuity, language, demeanor, deference and taste. These students were treated by the critics as colleagues or co-researchers and they spent considerable time and energy working with the students’ ideas with a view to developing a closer alignment between the design ‘idea’ and its ‘representation’. In stark contrast many critics were seen to exercise their symbolic power with full force when reviewing the work of the least able students. In these cases critics interrupted student presentations, used harsh, dismissive language such as ‘wrong’, ‘bad’ ‘rubbish’, ‘incompetent’, and were highly directive both verbally and somatically. In one case a critic was observed ‘correcting’ the drawings of a third-year student with a red pen. Clearly, in these cases the actions of the critics were primarily judgmental and were unlikely to empower, motivate or help the reflective learning process of the students concerned. Only three out of the nine critics observed explicitly supported very weak students through diagnostic questioning, the suggestion of tangible remedies and encouragement. These caring critics tended to be academics who had spent time studying how students learn and who were committed to supporting all students in their learning. This was contrasted to other academics and invited practitioner critics who were happy to declare in the post-jury interviews that their primarily interest was in taking part in conversations about design and the nature of architecture. For these critics their unofficial view was that ‘weak students were students who should not be studying architecture at all’.

Thus, while the oft-mentioned characterization of the critic as a power wielding ego-centric, eager for personal display and personal gratification, and intent on the coercion of student towards their personal notion of professional identity, was not consistently true, it was worrying that most critics did conform to this model at least some of the time (particularly in relation to reviewing the work of the weaker students). It was also worrying that the model of ‘hegemonic overlord’ was more prevalent than that of the caring pedagogue.
The Experience and Negotiation of Power

Thus far, it has been suggested that the design juries observed produced and objectified a power differential between the student and the critic merely through their participation in a set of formalized procedures. It has also been suggested that critics exercised the symbolic power, or authority, bestowed on them in a number of different ways, from coercively through to nurturing, depending on their ability or motivation to support student learning at the various levels of student ability. But how did the students respond to the jury ritual and the actions of the critics? There was little doubt from observing and talking to students in different year groups that, despite the powerful prevailing rhetoric in the school that extolled the virtues of the design jury as event for reflection and transformative learning, the asymmetry of power constructed by the design jury ritual resulted in the student perception of the design jury as primarily ‘judgmental’. Furthermore, it was this understanding that informed the tactics they adopted when preparing and presenting their work. Thus, through repeated design jury experiences, students seemed to develop tactics that they believed would guarantee them the best outcome possible, which sometimes meant, as one student exclaimed, merely ‘not getting killed’. In effect, students were found to develop a type of ‘ritual mastery’ which involved firstly developing an understanding of the ritual norms and practices, through a mixture of instruction and observation, and then acting accordingly. These practices included the pre-jury norms of long days and nights preparing special drawings and models, presenting designs to the critics in the accepted manner, and even unwinding with the critics in the pub after the jury. Obviously the students studied displayed varying degrees of compliance, for instance some students certainly worked harder than others in the period before juries, however, there was little doubt that through repetition students progressively embodied many of the accepted norms of an architectural identity including hard work, disciplinary commitment, competition and communal solidarity.

If the research findings suggested that students accepted the non-discursive practices of the jury process and by extension, the norms they inculcated as legitimate, then it might be reasonable to assume that they would also accept the legitimacy of the critics’ comments whatever their form or
content. Further, it might be expected, as Critical Pedagogy would suggest, that the objectification of the authority of the critic together with the exercise of that authority, often in directive ways, would prove highly effective as a means to inculcate students with the values and discourse of the dominant architectural identity (as represented by the critics). Indeed, students were observed time and time again delivering their oral presentations and then passively accepting, although sometimes with pained or quizzical expressions, the barrage of critics’ comments that followed. Yet, the student interviews often revealed that their ‘front stage’ acceptance of critics’ comments rarely aligned with their ‘backstage’ response. Students repeatedly said that the judgmental formality of the jury ritual encouraged them to present their work as confidently as possible and to ‘be seen’ to understand the critics’ discourse and comments. Such strategies clearly negated the possibilities of deep, transformative learning because they suppressed honest reflection, self-doubt and any admission of not knowing or not understanding. On many occasions students were observed agreeing with critics and revealing afterwards that they did not understand the comments because of the complexity of the critics’ discourse. Only the most acculturated students, those with a fully formed architectural identity, were seen to enter into a constructive reflective dialogue with critics, either in defense of their work or to ask for clarification or help. For these students the jury appeared to be a constructive learning experience. Yet, even the most able students admitted that they took a strategic approach to jury presentations with the aim of ‘doing well’ as opposed to honestly reflecting on their learning. Indeed, the notion of ‘gaining the best possible outcome’ seemed to underpin every student ‘game plan’, whatever their ability. However, it is critical that what seems at first like compliance should not be mistaken for consent. The following examples describe the ways in which students were able to accept, negotiate, or even resist consenting to the values and norms modeled by the critics.

**Passive Compliance:** Low-level learners, those not able to operate on the discursive level of the critics, and who generally received the harshest criticism, explained that they operated a strategic form ‘passive resistance’ within the jury situation. Although they rarely understood what was being said about their work, they would adopt a demeanor that suggested acceptance and/or agreement with
the critics with a view to avoid ‘being shown up’ or ‘just to get it over with’. This group of students explained that they survived by following their tutors’ instructions from week to week whilst admitting that they did not really ‘understand’. In some ways these students were making the strategic decision that the best way to negotiate their way through the program was through surface learning (imitation and following instruction) rather than through deep learning (internalizing their experiences towards a restructuring of their architectural identity). They calculated that adopting strategies of passivity suggestive of compliance might just get them through juries in the short term and the program in the longer term. This attitude might seem cynical but in the absence of truly student-centered learning low-level learners often have few options.

*Active Compliance:* Those students for whom juries were observed to be constructive and dialogical experiences tended to be high-level learners (i.e. the extended abstract thinker). Post-jury interviews revealed that these students understood that their engagement with the atelier and jury system was a kind of pedagogic ‘game’. They explained that to doing well meant embracing the disciplinary identity of the atelier tutors, even if one didn’t wholly agree or believe in it, although sometimes this strategy didn’t work if an invited critic was antagonistic towards the atelier’s stance. This form of compliance might seem a little calculated or cynical but one final year student explained that ‘there was always something valuable to be learnt by following your atelier tutor’. This group also took a longer-term perspective on their learning. They believed that the experience of several different atelier tutors, each with their own identities, would allow them to construct their own identity as a kind of collage of the ‘best bits’.

*Active Resistance:* Students were occasionally observed arguing with critics, but very rarely. Argument tended to be adopted by students who either had very little understanding that the critics had the authority to define the architecture and architectural identity or just enjoyed questioning that authority. In one instance a third-year student attempted to justify her design on the basis of Feng Shui and was told by a critic that Feng Shui was ‘mystical mumbo jumbo’ and was ‘not relevant to
western architecture’. Despite the student’s attempts to justify her position the critics used their authority to dismiss the student’s arguments. Clearly, in another time, another atelier or another school of architecture the student’s ideas might have been praised. In this case the student was clearly unaware that Feng Shui did not fall within the critics’ construction of acceptable generators for architecture.

The above examples are paradigmatic and are not intended to deny the uniqueness of every interaction, that is, that every critic and student brings their individual personal history to each pedagogic encounter. Yet, this fact does not deny the reality that all pedagogic encounters are located in social settings and therefore the rules of encounter, as well as the possible outcomes, are bounded by this setting. In this case study the students and critics were free to act within the boundaries of the discursive field of architecture. Thus, although the findings suggested that students had considerable freedom to accept, negotiate or resist the critics’ directions after the juries the way they chose to reconstruct their individual identities was, in reality, conceptually and materially constrained by the identity (the curriculum, rules, regulations, rituals, spatial configurations, constituencies, values and beliefs) of the school of architecture. Further, the fact that students want to become architects provides an overarching incentive for students to choose to acquire, or in some cases learn to imitate, the notions of architectural identity that are promoted by their teachers, critics and school.

Conclusions

The reader might recognize something of their own experiences of juries in the descriptions above. Certainly, both the form of the design jury ritual and many of the student experiences quoted parallel those described in other contemporary reports, suggesting that the findings are not unusual or unique. There is now a bourgeoning literature that suggests that the asymmetrical construction of power created by the jury ritual encourages students to adopt surface tactics that were likely to result in ‘a good judgment’ (hiding their weaknesses and playing to their strengths, pandering to the critics taste etc) and positively deters them from presenting their authentic architectural ideas and understanding for reflection with expert others. Yet, paradoxically, the design jury continues to be
used in a relatively consistent form throughout the world. The design jury appears to be architectural education’s sacred cow. So, what is to be done? If, as the research suggests, the sacred cow is terminally sick, then perhaps there is an opportunity to re-ritualize and reinvigorate architectural education rather than to prescribe medication, as others commentators have suggested?  

Certainly educators now have the tools to re-think the design jury, they know more about professional knowledge, how students learn and what conditions support student learning. In architectural education we know that the design studio promotes functional knowledge and reflective intelligence and also that students are more likely to learn in environments that are non-judgmental, playful, cooperative, convivial and purposeful. We also know that learning outcomes, teaching and assessment must align if students are to learn what we intend.  

So, once the assumption that there will be a design jury at the end of every design project is rejected, it becomes possible to devise a variety of events that occur at different stages of a project that are designed to support explicit aspects of student learning.’ When design tutors and students from the host institution were asked to explore this idea they had no problem devising a whole range of new events including:

- Exhibitions that celebrate the end of projects and disseminate the results to a variety of audiences (enhances collaborative working, presentation and communication skills).
- Special Tutorial Days where relevant experts, clients, technical experts, practitioners, clients etc are invited to give individual or small group tutorials (enhances functional knowledge, critical reflection and communications skills).
- Peer Reviews in small group using assessment explicit criteria and levels of achievement at intervals throughout a design project (enhances critical reflection).
- Self-Evaluation exercises that ask the students to assess their own work against explicit criteria and levels of achievement before submitting their design portfolio for assessment (enhances critical self-reflection and self-management).
- Post-Portfolio Assessment Tutorials where design tutors provide verbal feedback on individual student performance (enhances critical reflection)
Whilst this list above is not exhaustive it provides several ideas for re-ritualizing the design studio so that it more explicitly support relevant student learning. Several of these ideas will be implemented in the host institution in 2006-07 and subsequently the outcomes will be recorded, evaluated and disseminated.

Although the introduction of new rituals suggests the creation of a new, more supportive, collaborative and dialogical learning environment we must remind ourselves that this promise will only become a reality if experts, design tutors and critics of various kinds, become more reflexive about the way they exercise their (inevitable) symbolic power over students. Only when experts begin to see themselves as co-learners engaged in a collective project to continually question and reconstruct architectural discourse, rather than as prophets whose role is to convert students into disciples, will architectural education become truly student-centered.

Endnotes


3 The main inspiration for this article was Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (trans. A. Sheridan) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).


In England the standard pattern for architectural education is a three-year undergraduate degree followed by a year in architectural practice; a further two years in graduate education; a further year in architectural practice and then a professional registration examination.

Data analysis was carried out using Grounded Theory [B. G. Glaser and A. L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies or Qualitative Research (Chicago: Aldine, 1967)]. Rigorous indexing and sequential analysis of the data led to the definition of core thematic categories and sub-categories of student experience. In parallel with the development of thematic categories the researcher began to hypothesize about the relationship between categories. These hypotheses were constantly tested and revised in an iterative manner against subsequent data (constant comparison) until the point of theoretical saturation was reached. The resulting theoretical constructs are explored in the body of the article.

If rituals are understood, as Caroline Bell suggests, as ‘formalised, routinised and often supervised practices that act on and through the body to effect transformation’, then the design jury might be considered as a ritual par excellence. See: Caroline Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) for a further explication of rituals.

The nineteenth century École des Beaux Arts devised the ‘jury’ or ‘review’ system to carry out assessment of student designs. The ‘jury’ consisted of panel of ‘experts’ who would make a collective judgment about the quality of students’ work based on a verbal presentation of the drawn or modeled work made by the students’ studio master (as opposed to the students themselves). This system of assessment by proxy was subsequently adopted in all schools of architecture and the system has proved remarkably resilient, although in the post-war period it became more common for students to present and defend their own work.
Half the students interviewed had worked all night before their jury and all the students admitted to working more than twelve-hour days during the week before their juries.

The nine design juries were constituted as follows: The first year juries consisted of two internal design tutors and students and the third and sixth year design juries consisted of two internal design tutors, one external critic and students. The external critics were either academics or practitioners. There were no non-architects present at any of the juries observed reflecting the ‘closed’ nature of architectural discourse.


The critics from all nine of the observed juries were interviewed directly after the juries had finished. None of the critics had ever questioned the degree of alignment between their conceptions of the jury’s function and the reality.

The research found that about twenty percent of students in each jury group, regardless of the year, were able to ‘play the game’ and as a consequence were treated by critics as co-designers.

The numbers of students who received critical and highly directed instruction varied greatly and was largely dependent on the constitution of the jury members. In three out of the nine juries observed the tone set by the jury members was very critical and all but the top twenty percent of students received very negative de-motivating comments.

Of the twenty-seven students interviewed after their juries only seven reported that they found their jury a motivating experience and twelve students said that they were positively de-motivated by their jury experience.

The nine students interviewed ranked the function of the jury as follows: nine agreed that ‘judgment on individual performance’ was the most important purpose (even though the assessment
was not summative); five agreed that ‘feedback to help learning’ was the second most important second function and four agreed that ‘symbolically marking the end of the project’ was the second most important function.

18 Erving Goffman coined the term ‘front stage’ to describe the identity people present to other and ‘back stage’ to represent their inner identity. See: Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) for a more detailed explanation.

19 Passive compliance was by far the most prevalent tacit adopted by students. Very few students either presented their learning difficulties to critics or spoke up if they did not understand the critics’ comments.


23 John Biggs used the term ‘Constructive Alignment’ to denote a good teaching system that aligns teaching method and assessment to the learning outcomes stated in the objectives, so that all aspects of the system act in accord to support appropriate learning. See John Biggs, Teaching for Quality Learning at University (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003).

24 For other constructive ideas for new learning events see Rosie Parnell. ‘The right crit for the right project: what implications might learning outcomes have for the review process?’ Trigger Paper at