Delft University of Technology

Planning as Critical Engaged Practice
Consequences for Studio Education.

Newton, C.E.L.

Important note
To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

Teaching, Learning & Researching
Spatial Planning

Edited by Roberto Rocco, Gregory Bracken,
Caroline Newton & Marcin Dąbrowski

Teaching, Learning & Researching
Spatial Planning

Planning as Critically Engaged Practice
Consequences for studio education

CAROLINE NEWTON

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF SPATIAL PLANNING & STRATEGY AT TU DELFT AND FELLOW AT THE VAN EESTEREN-FLUCK & VAN LOHUIZEN FOUNDATION, C.E.L.NEWTON-1@TUDELFT.NL

Space, people, and time are all intertwined in the city, a complex system in which planners intervene. Their strategic plans and neighbourhood designs impact the daily lives of city dwellers. This emphasises the point that spatial planning and urban design are not technical disciplines. The everyday use of space and its symbolic meanings must be incorporated. Planning as an engaged practice involves explicit engagement with the Habitat III goals and, more specifically, the New Urban Agenda (NUA) goals. This commitment to sustainable urban development means we are working to create integrated and just societies for the future. The NUA paved the way for the right to the city to be incorporated into planning. This chapter discusses incorporating both aspects (socio-spatial complexity and the right to the city) into planning education, specifically the design studio. It begins by questioning the design studio's current functioning. It then shows a resurrected studio setting, where socio-spatial complexity and the right to the city can be gradually integrated meaning that the studio will no longer be about what is, but about what is 'yet to be'.

CRITICAL THINKING, DESIGNERLY WAYS OF KNOWING, ENGAGED PRACTICE, STUDIO PEDAGOGIES, ENGAGEMENT

1. Introduction

The strong entwinement of space, people, and time is ubiquitous in modern cities. Spatial planners are called upon to intervene in this complex system. With their strategic plans and neighbourhood designs, planners affect the daily life experience of the city's inhabitants. Thus, spatial planning and urban design cannot - and should not - be mere technical disciplines. We must incorporate the everyday experience and use of space and the associated symbolical meanings into how we imagine planning practice. This chapter proposes an engaged planning approach that is normative in nature and grounded in critical thinking. This engaged approach stands in opposition to previous technocratic approaches and current managerial practices. Planning as an engaged practice also requires an intentional engagement with the Habitat III agenda's goals, particularly those outlined in the New Urban Agenda (NUA). This commitment to the sustainable and just development of cities, towns, and human settlements means that we are working towards building future socially integrated and just societies. The NUA has cleared the way to integrate the right to the city in spatial planning.

The right to the city is a concept that came into existence in the late 1960s. The uprisings and student protests externalised the dissatisfaction with the uneven distribution of resources and goods at that time and with the processes that created an uneven urban situation.

In broad terms, we can understand the right to the city as twofold: it is first about the full use of the city and the right to appropriate it, but more importantly, it is also about a collective right to take part in the making of the city. Alternatively, as David

Harvey phrased it:

> *The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization (Harvey, 2008: 23).*

Thus, the right to the city is ultimately a strong political principle that should lead to action in which the dispossessed, the neglected, and the discontented can claim back the city and shape it to their needs and aspirations.

Introducing both these aspects - socio-spatial complexity and the right to the city - in planning education, and specifically in the design studio setting, is the topic of this contribution.

The chapter starts with a discussion on the origins of the design studio as a tool in higher education, questioning its current functioning. Next, it presents a renewed studio setting in which the **integration of the socio-spatial complexity and the right to the city happen at different stages**. Therefore, the studio is no longer about what is, but about what is 'yet to be'. The pedagogical approach presented below is grounded in the work of Peter Marcuse (2009a) in order to foreground the critical approach and the right to the city. It also uses Henri Lefebvre's (1991) trialectic understanding of space to capture the socio-spatial complexity.

2. Design studio pedagogy

The design studio has become a popular method of teaching architecture and urban design in the twentieth century. The origins of this pedagogical model, whereby various aspects of the discipline are discussed in one exercise, can be traced back to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in nineteenth-century Paris and even further back to the Académie d'Architecture. Established in 1635, the Académie was the first and only school dedicated to architects' education. Its impact on subsequent institutions both in Europe and globally can hardly be underestimated. An atelier (the studio), was run in parallel to the lectures and hosted by a master architect (referred to as the Patron). These ateliers became famous for the quality of their teaching and the success of their students. This success was demonstrated by the students successively winning the Prix de Rome (Griffin, 2020), perhaps the most significant prize for the arts in Europe in the nineteenth century.

Here, the foundation was laid out for the organisation of architecture education until today. Both the existing shortcomings and potential strengths of current design studio teaching are heavily influenced by the first approaches of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Before we demonstrate (in the next section) how this studio setting supports a critical spatial design and planning education, we will take a more critical look at highlighting some deficiencies of the design studio approach. Howland notes that when he looks back on his own educational journey

The long hours of work in a common studio space forged us into a close-knit group of men and women who were marked by our dedication, endurance and talent. We shared the excitement of learning to see the world in a new way, of learning to distinguish between well and poorly designed glasses while our friends were drinking coffee unaware from styrofoam cups. We were the imaginative professionals with certified taste (Howland, 1985).

Furthermore, he felt that '[w]hat the architectural tradition and our mentors suggested and what we students were teaching each other was that boring and conventional people produced boring and conventional designs. We encouraged eccentric dress, hyperbolic speech and unconventional behavior' (Howland, 1985).

Both quotes illustrate how, already during the years of education, architects set themselves apart from others and developed an 'architect-artist' identity expressed in clothing style (see, for example, Rau, 2017), aesthetic taste, and behaviour. Professors and teachers reinforce this culture, nurturing the students' ambition and their assumed possibility to become the starchitect who will leave their mark on the world.

Secondly, an over-emphasis on the teacher (rather than attention to the student) poisons studio-based learning. This is detrimental for a constructivist pedagogy in which both student and teacher are on an equal footing throughout the design assignment (Webster, 2006).

Thirdly, the emphasis on the design outcome, along with the importance placed on evaluation moments during which students are judged, demands that students prepare for a final presentation in front of a jury of 'experts' or 'masters'. These one-off events not only harm a healthy student life (e.g. late nights, high levels of stress), but they establish a 'skewed' power hierarchy in which students must justify their work and thoughts to the teacher (and the experts), frequently in a spatial

setting that reinforces this hierarchical relationship and frequently accompanied by a discourse in which the experts demonstrate their expertise while simultaneously questioning the student's (Koch et al., 2002; Webster, 2006).

Thus, studio settings run the risk of creating a toxic environment, forming architects as experts, as masters of creation and architecture, and putting them high above the 'average man'. This Architect (with a capital A) is assumed to possess the knowledge and expertise necessary to create designs that are both reason and art. The interaction of these two facets – the architect as expert and the architect as artist – contribute to the architect's strengthening of his or her reputation as 'artist – genius', upon which 'the architectural culture to the outside world' (Till, 2009: 160) is built.

Research by the American Institute of Architecture Students in 2002 showed not much difference in the 'studio culture' between architecture schools in the country. There is an intense emphasis on the design outcome rather than the design process, and the context in the assignment is being reduced to a brief description in which, for example, the customer or the community at large are no longer of interest but are only marginal influences (Koch et al., 2002). This is a particularly worrying evolution because it fosters the illusion that architecture is an autonomous and artistic discipline, while Till (2011) has shown that 'architecture depends' (2009: 178). Architects are largely responsible for the outcomes of their work, and understanding the design intent is critical (Till, 2009: 166). Raising and fostering this awareness is crucial in today's studio-based education.

The organisation of the design studio gives students the chance to think and work holistically. As an exercise, they start by studying the design challenge presented to them, then putting their expertise in practice. In ideal circumstances, students gather knowledge from a wide range of disciplines and areas of interest and process them as a whole. Alternative solutions are addressed and discussed with the teacher or with peers. Thus, students are encouraged to critically engage with their subject of study and leave the beaten track when searching for alternative possibilities. This setting, in which students learn-by-doing and are asked to reflect on their process and actions, is what Schön has called 'reflective practicum' (Schön, 1985: 89). Studio-based learning thus has the potential of facilitating learners to inspire and educate themselves. This hypothesis is based on the theories of Rancière (1991) and Freire (1970). Education, as both authors emphasise, is more than merely instruction; it is all about giving students control over their own learning.

Another point highlighted by Schön is that studio education is training in making things (Schön, 1985: 94). When designing, students are actually creating spatial arrangements, whether these are architectural objects or urban transformations. They have to be aware that, after graduating, the outcomes of their design process will have tangible implications in the real world. Evaluating the effect of the spatial interventions on the daily life of people, on the creation, or obstruction, of opportunities for urban dwellers, needs to be part of the design studio pedagogy. Schön (1985: 97) stresses that the work of the (architectural) design studio is a normative one, designing imagined futures and reflecting on their desirability.

In conclusion, studio education is thus about learning how to master a design process that is 1) anchored in research (on the topic and the loca-

tion), 2) creates a representation of the (desired) future situation, and 3) is cognisant of the impact of its outcome on the context in which it is placed.

3. Critically engaged planning

A critically engaged planning approach is deeply inspired by the work of Peter Marcuse (2007; 2009a; 2009b; 2009). Whereby, investigating the world as it appears before our eyes should go beyond accepting it as it is, but be about looking for the hidden potentials, exploring and unravelling in order to try and understand challenges and see opportunities for where change can be made. Thus, being critical is more than a negative criticism. Using a wide array of perspectives to analyse and scrutinise the world as we see and experience it, critical theory offers an opportunity to develop counter approaches, actions, and ideas that allow us to question the current organisation and management of our society (a good example of this being acts of counter mapping). It is then essential to act upon these things, following Marcuse's (2009a) call to expose, propose, and politicise.

As with critical theory, critical design is a way of designing that questions the existing ways of doing things (things that acknowledge the dominant thoughts of a society). This way of design is in opposition to a design that conforms to dominant ideas and anchors these ideas in the built environment. The design of the waiting bars at bus stops in London is an obvious example. By designing bars that people can lean against when waiting for the bus instead of benches to sit on, the designer also ensures that the homeless cannot use it as a sleeping place. This speaks a lot about the kind of society we live in and the decisions made by local governments

and institutions with decision-making power.

Critical design questions these dominant modes of living. Design becomes an act that exposes the given, dares to provoke, and triggers debate. Next to this, it can also imagine and represent the unthought of, spark enthusiasm for previously unconsidered possibilities, ignite the belief in another possible future.

4. The design studio's potential for critical design

Marcuse stressed the possible contributions of critical theory to current challenges; more specifically, he pondered how architects, designers, practitioners, activists, and urban intellectuals could establish a critical urban practise that promotes the right to the city for all. He proposes establishing a course of action that includes revealing, then suggesting, and eventually, politicising.

In a first step the root of the problem is examined and then the problem's results are introduced explicitly. Next to collecting information and analysing the current situation, injustices are explicitly exposed. Accordingly, the second stage is research-based strategy development. The strategies aim to respond to the problems the first step revealed, and plan desired outcomes. The techniques would likely include physical as well as social and legal components. The third step is to politicise. The ideas for future activities, political actions, and action plans need to be shared through the appropriate platforms, and support should be sought through various media and within the communities we belong to. Marcuse (2007) pointed out the importance of clearly disclosing the limitations of the planning process in order not to raise ex-

Expose   Propose   Politicise
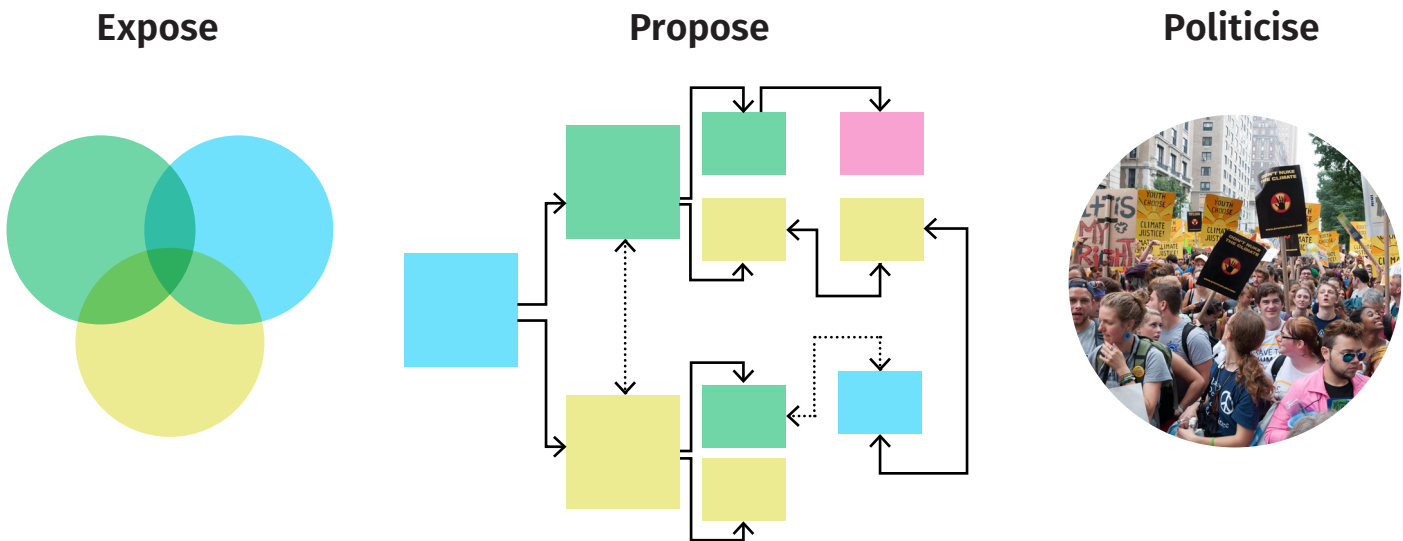
Figure 1: The design studio as a catalyst for critical thinking and engaged planning. Diagram by R. Rocco. Photo: The People's Climate March rally in New York City, Sept. 21 2014. Photo by Alejandro Alvarez - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?cu-rid=47718309

pectations which planning cannot deliver. But importantly, Marcuse stresses that this does not mean that planning needs to limit itself to merely formulating immediate and short-term answers to the problems posed. Critical planning, according to Marcuse, 'looks to the roots of problems as well as their symptoms and pursues a vision of something beyond the pragmatic and beyond what is immediately doable today' (2007: 10). **If the design studio is empowered with this proposition, then it can transform from being a problem-solving exercise concerned with that which is, to a truly projective design that is about that which is yet to be.**

The organisation of the design studio has the potential to be the ideal locus for teaching planning as a critical engaged practice. The basic structure is empowered by **acknowledging the normative character of urban design and spatial planning** and by using the critical lenses and approach suggested by Marcuse.

4.1 Exposing phase

The design studio starts from an in-depth analysis of the challenges presented. It does so not only by a typical spatial mapping, by a morphological analysis, understanding the functional zoning or the relevant policies, it also looks into the socio-spatial issues and more importantly it uncovers the injustices and inequalities that are present within the context in which we will be intervening. We make use of Lefebvre's trialectic understanding of space to do so.

Space is a complex social construction, not an abstract or neutral given (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre's theory gives a helpful insight for considering how people and their environments interact, and how people's perception of these spaces functions. He suggests understanding space through a triad (conceived, perceived, and lived spaces), in which each part has a specific and explicit role in the reproduction of society and in securing the hegemony of a

dominant system (Lefebvre, 1991: 32–33).

First, the **conceived representations** of space are created by professionals and experts, such as planners, architects, and scientists. The representations of space have the experience of these experts infused within them, along with their normative positions and ideological perspectives. Space is often portrayed in an abstract manner, and as a result, it is difficult for lay people to understand. Experts use the objects that are representations of space, such as the maps, to highlight their knowledge and influence in society.

Second, Lefebvre speaks about the **perceived space**. In this case, he is referring to the spatial habits of the public. Space has a big effect on how people use it. The physicality of space, the morphology of the city, and the material nature of elements all influence how people use a space. The everyday routines of people are defined by the space in which they live. Consider these two examples: a car-free city centre where pedestrians can easily cross the street after the centre has become one wide pedestrian area; and the other: a gated community that obstructs straight routes, causing shortcuts and straight connections to be impaired.

Finally, Lefebvre speaks about the **lived space**. Urban spaces are both tangible and concrete, but they are also intangible, imbued, and informed by imaginaries, feelings, and personal experiences as well. Different individuals or groups can assign different meanings to the same space. The third aspect in Lefebvre's triadic model is important in helping people comprehend their environment.

In summary, the three Lefebvrian dimensions of space help us understand how urban spaces work and how inequality can be generated within them. Injustice will occur at any of the three levels in the triad, from red-lining to physical checkpoints, or the absence of quality outdoor spaces, and the prohibition of cultural and/or religious gatherings.

4.2 Proposing phase

We need to move beyond the mere debate of a sustainable development for our cities. We need to think how to make **resilient cities** and neighbourhoods. Cities that are able to live through (thus be prepared for, respond to, and recover from) societal and environmental pressures that will increasingly become visible, whether these challenges are coming from demographical changes, climate change, natural disasters, or other threats. **The transition towards resilient cities** needs to take place within the transdisciplinary approach explained above. The relationship between planning and politics underpins an emerging debate about the political engagement and/or the possible complicity of planning and design. Recognising the importance of planning and design practices for the (co-)creation of knowledge (in societies characterised by scarcity and crisis) and seeking to reassert their relevance, designers are becoming more interested in social issues. Design is often projective and propositional; it uses the projection of possible future outcomes to explore and assess the different parameters and possibilities to reframe the investigative realm.

Scenario building in urban planning are explorations of possible futures that are constantly moving between interrogating the current and imagining the future, between the known and the unknown, between the familiar and the alien (inspired by Cook, 2013: 87). If we observe on the one hand and create on the other, the potential for questioning and developing alternative ideas and strategies can flourish.

4.3 Politicising Phase

As argued above, design and planning are not autonomous disciplines. The realisation of proposed ideas and concepts have a tangible impact in space and the everyday lives of people. Coming up with beautiful plans and ideas is not enough, ideas must be discussed in the public realm. So, the third step is to politicise. The future operation, political campaign, and action plan proposals that are needed to realise the plan need to be communicated through the right platforms, and support should be pursued via different media and among peers.

A crucial tool for the urban designer and strategic planner at this point is the drawing. Drawing is inherently a multi-layered form of communication, and is able to move from observational to investigative to propositional in seconds. This provides many benefits, including the ability to express concepts, as well as the development and the convincing communication of counter-hegemonic or alternative ideas and strategies.

Conceptual sketches of potential technologies and possible urban futures also motivates officials and civil society to act. If we can envision alternate worlds, we can create progress. As Harvey has argued, 'A global anti-capitalist movement is unlikely to emerge without some animating vision of what is to be done and why' (2010: 227).

5. Conclusion

As argued elsewhere (Newton, 2013), architects and urban planners need to reflect on their role in planning and design processes. The practice of the urban designer needs to be deconstructed and recalibrated in order to gain a better understanding of how to deal with the urban project and to dare to shift the question from 'where do things belong' (classical modern and functional planning) to 'to whom do things belong'. This search for a counter hegemonic planning (maybe what Miraftab (2009) would call 'insurgent planning') is imperative if we want to bring Lefebvre's right to the city back to centre stage. As stressed in the beginning of 'The Right to the City', it is 'the right to centrality, the right to not be excluded from urban form, if only with respect to the decisions and actions of power' (Lefebvre, 2003: 194).

In this renewed context, the role of the designer is put under scrutiny. **The focus in the whole (urban) design practice is no longer on the 'expert' planner, but on the process, grounded in a community base and the accompanying strategies and activism that have the ability to transform the city in co-creation with people.**
The studio setup as the pedagogical setting for this engaged approach helps students to develop a socio-spatial cognition; a knowledge and understanding of the socio-spatial intertwinement, not only through learning, but also through exploration, experience, and critical thinking. Students then translate this into strategies and actions that allow people, citizens, communities to take ownership of their right to the city.

Central in this reasoning is the idea of **critical design** as a 'mediation of theory and practice in social

transformation' (Friedmann, 1987: 391).

In this recalibrated role, we, as practitioners, urban planners, or architects, take a more active role. In other words, we are open to being surprised by the urban reality we meet and refuse to be swayed by easy-to-understand answers and conventional thinking in our efforts to handle the challenges ahead. Innovation in urban design practise requires a new mentality and a reconfiguration of design, transforming the practise into a catalyst for change.

The studio pedagogy presented above allows students to approach design challenges from the perspective of the people, or the perspective of a community without losing sight of the need to facilitate the re-appropriation of spaces for collective action.

6. References

Awan, N., Schneider, T., & Till, J. (2011). *Spatial Agency: Other ways of doing architecture*. Routledge.

Cook, P. (2013). Looking and drawing. *Architectural Design*, 83(5), 80–87.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.

Friedmann, J. (1987). *Planning in the Public Domain: From knowledge to action*. Princeton University Press.

Griffin, A. (2020). *The Rise of Academic Architectural Education. The origins and enduring influence of the Académie d'Architecture*. Routledge.

Harvey, D. (2008). The right to the city. *New Left Review*, 53(53), 23–40.

Harvey, D. (2010). *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. Oxford University Press.

Howland, M. (1985). On becoming an architect. *Perspectives on the Professions*, 5(1).

Koch, A., Schwennsen, K., Dutton, T.A., & Smith, D. (2002). *The Redesign of Studio Culture: A report of the AIAS Studio Culture Task Force. American Institute of Architecture Students*. http://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&btnG=Search&q=intitle:The+Redesign+of+Studio+Culture:+A+Report+of+the+AIAS+Studio+Culture+Task+Force#0

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space.* Blackwell.

Lefebvre, H. (2003). *The Urban Revolution.* University of Minnesota Press.

Marcuse, P. (2007). Social justice in New Orleans: Planning after Katrina. *Progressive Planning*, 172, 8–12.

Marcuse, P. (2009a). From critical urban theory to the right to the city. *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 13(2), 185–197.

Marcuse, P. (2009b). From justice planning to commons planning. In P. Marcuse, J. Connolly, J. Novy, I. Olivo, C. Potter, & J. Steil (Eds.), *Searching for the just city: Debates in urban theory and practice* (pp. 91–102). Routledge.

Marcuse, P., Connolly, J., Novy, J., Olivo, I., Potter, C., & Steil, J. (Eds.) (2009). *Searching for the just city. Debates in urban theory and practice*. Routledge.

Miraftab, F. (2009). Insurgent planning: Situating radical planning in the global south. *Planning Theory*, 8(1), 32–50.

Newton, C. (2013). Into the urban beyond. In C. Boano, W. Hunter, & C. Newton (Eds.), *Contested urbanism in Dharavi: Writings and projects for the resilient city* (p. 134). Development Planning Unit, The Bartlett, University College London.

Rancière, J. (1991). *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Stanford University Press.

Rau, C. (2017). *Why Do Architects Wear Black?* Birkhäuser.

Schön, D.A. (1985). *The Design Studio. Explorations of its Traditions and Potential*. RIBA Publications Limited.

Till, J. (2009). Architecture Depends. MIT Press.

Webster, H. (2006). A Foucauldian look at the design jury. Art, *Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 5(1), 5–19.