

# Transformative Pedagogies: Trajectories Towards Transformative Design Education

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**How can architectural education prompt and support students to embrace architecture as a transformative process towards shared understandings and a call for shared actions? Transformative pedagogy has been defined as “a learning process that seeks to contextualise contemporary issues as active learning instruments for pro-active response” (Salama 2015, 310). In this paper, the authors will present three trajectories for promoting transformative pedagogy that comprise a non-self-referential approach to architectural education: Othering, Complementing, and De-gendering. The authors describe each trajectory in relation to course offerings and learning experiences at the School of Architecture and Community Development (SACD), University of Detroit Mercy and illustrate the transformative pedagogical theories and practices that inform and support an educational model and transdisciplinary content that is built outside-in versus inside-out. We conclude that adopting this transformative pedagogical framework can support a radical shift in architectural education that historically has prioritized disciplinary knowledge and skills rather than responsiveness to others, communities, and societies.**

## PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF EDUCATION: FROM STUDENT TO PERSON

At the root of any theory and practice of education are hidden underpinnings that frame conceptualizations of those involved in the educational process. We begin by asking: What conceptualizations of the *individual* constitute the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of mainstream approaches to education? As a starting point, we employ the word *education*, versus *instruction*, as the latter reductively implies knowledge transfer and summative assessments attempting to measure how much knowledge was gained/stored/incorporated, while the former refers to a much more holistic, multi- inter- or transdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning which recognizes different forms of education that happen outside the curriculum and classroom. Similarly, the use of the term *individual* is intentional, and is meant to contrast the wide-spread use of the term *student*, a word that evokes ideas of someone “studiously

studying” something that is a given. A more appropriate alternative to *student* would be the less commonly used term *learner*, which evokes ideas of active learning processes, intrinsic motivation, self-directedness, and agency in learning. Nevertheless, this last term also oversimplifies ontologically the focus of the conversation about education. A more appropriate term, which broadens the focus by acknowledging complexity and intersectionality, would most certainly be *person*. In fact, a person learns as part of life, and learning is what forms them as *person*. Along these lines, *educating the person as a whole*, is a fairly well-known expression that attempts to center pedagogy around each individual holistically. The term *person* suggests uniqueness, individuality, identity, autonomy, and relationships to distinct others.

Furthermore, a quote by the novelist Hesse highlights the intricate system of relationship between a person and the reality they are immersed in: “*But every person is more than [themselves: they] are also the unique, entirely particular, and in every case meaningful and remarkable point of intersection where the phenomena of the world overlap, only once and never again in just this way. That is why everyone’s story is important...*” (Hesse 1919, 1). This quote dismantles ideas of impermeable individuality and allows us to think of individuality defined as outside in, versus inside out. Simultaneously, the idea of a unique intersection of events in place and time captures the importance of both the sense of singularity and of individual value in relation to the world and others, and the unavoidable necessity of synergistically linking individuality to the phenomena of the world.

## A CALL FOR EMBRACING RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY IN EDUCATION

We argue that traditional individualistic, exclusionary, and strictly disciplinary approaches to education, including architectural education, which emphasize learning as individual development, pursuit, and success, are shaped by an ontological framework centered around the concept of the individual as autonomous. Ideas, or in other words cultural constructs, of singular authorship, of individual genius and intuition all stem from such conceptualizations and lack an acknowledgement and understanding of positionality and embeddedness in the context

(socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-economic, etc.). On the contrary, social pragmatic theory frames the very idea of *being* as interconnected and contextual and explains individuation and socialization in the context of continuity between personal identity, primary group, and social organization. In fact, such theories define individuation as a process of “sympathetic introspection” that can only happen based on common perspectives and shared understandings (Schubert 2006). As Gergen put it: “that the concept of autonomous individual is a cultural construction – as opposed to an ontological essential – seems beyond debate at this juncture” (Gergen 2011, 205).

Thus, understanding the individual as relational, i.e. embracing relational ontology as a basic framework, allows us to recenter education around an expanded conceptualization of being, one in which the person is formed by intersecting forces and phenomena, including place –*where one is*, the socio-cultural environment –*with whom one is*, ways of thinking that are learned and define –*how one is*, and what is more traditionally the focus of pedagogy, that is the body of knowledge or content –*what one knows*, the best practices and strategies –*how one knows to do*, and the tools and techniques –*with what one does*. From these underpinnings we can begin to frame architectural education as a transformative process of how we are, how we understand where we are, how we interact with others, what we know, how we know to do, and with what we do.

### TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGIES

What is transformative learning? And what are the characteristics of a transformative pedagogy? In essence, transformative pedagogy is a form of teaching/learning that can foster transformational learning processes and impact intellectual, personal, cultural, and political perspectives, among others (Kiely 2005). In other words, a “transformative experience brings about a fundamental shift in what it is like to be ourselves” (Yacek 2020, 263). In a paper entitled “Should Education be Transformative?” Yacek (2020) identifies qualities of *transformative experiences*, such as that they are momentous, as “Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were” (Freire 1993, 43); irreversible, therefore admitting no possibility of unknowing and unthinking, or in other words of turning back to previous positions and ideas; rapid, as they can happen within the span of a semester; and generative of phenomenological discontinuity, as “transformation involves a radical break in what we thought to be true or right about the world and ourselves” (Yacek 2020, 260), and epistemic discontinuity as the transformative experience ‘teaches [us] something [we] could not have learned without having that kind of experience’ (Paul 2014, 10), such as the transformative experience of eating ice cream for the first time (Yacek 2020).

Within the design field, transformative pedagogies have been recognized to include “active and experiential scenarios” (Salama 2015, 317), focus on process and interdisciplinary thinking, provide “an inductive collaborative problem-solving

alternative to traditional domain-knowledge deducting learning,” and require students to engage in “listening, dialogue, action and reflection” (Salama 2015, 310-311). These pedagogies “contextualize contemporary issues as active-learning instruments for proactive response” (Salama 2015, 310), allowing for a form of interdisciplinarity that has been termed as *exogenous interdisciplinarity*, because issues originate in the community rather than the academy (Klein 2012). In this way, transformative pedagogies are systemic and opposite to traditional domain-knowledge deductive learning, also called mechanistic learning. In fact differences in frameworks, methods, and tools between the two types of pedagogies are clear: in mechanistic learning, education is not treated as a whole, knowledge is fragmented and teaching relies on show-telling communication and knowledge transfer, through hypothetical projects and assignments, while in systemic learning education is considered as part of a larger process that occurs in life and the real world, and requires knowledge construction, interdisciplinary thinking and active experiential scenarios (Salama 2015, Figure 8.1, 317). Furthermore, transformative pedagogies in the design field have been tested in recent years through a broad range of action-oriented approaches, such as community engaged, participatory, public interest design, design-build projects, live-projects, inquiry-based learning, collaborative learning, service-learning, civically engaged learning, study abroad, and other out-of-the-classroom learning experiences (Salama 2015).

More specifically, various models have been advanced to describe phases of transformative learning. In particular, Mezirow (2000) and Kiely (2005) have done significant work, as well as several poststructuralist and feminist scholars (e.g. Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006). A common trait in these models is the identification of dissonance and awareness of self-positionality as initial starting points that lead to border crossing, which involves the questioning of preconceived ideas and notions. This first phase allows for the gradual emergence of new conceptualizations, through a process called in anthropology *ontological turn* (Holbraad 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), where new ways of thinking and altogether new concepts are accommodated, and this is followed, in some models, by later phases of reintegration and empathic connection. For example, research conducted by the first author (Bernasconi, 2020a) investigated othering, in relation to new emergent conceptualizations resulting from engaged learning, and distinguished between dichotomic othering, a form of understanding and drawing similarities and differences that maintains separate conceptualizations of us and them, from a form of synechistic othering that blurs the edge and allows student to think of themselves as part of a larger whole. Based on existing models and research by the authors on transformative pedagogies, three trajectories for transformative design education are proposed here: *othering*, *complementing*, and *de-gendering*.



Figure 1. Teaching and Learning the City course activities: towards *othering* in education. Photo Credit: C. Bernasconi.

### THREE TRAJECTORIES TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE DESIGN EDUCATION

*Othering*. The first trajectory involves engaged learning, such as critically engaged civic learning (Vincent et al. 2021) or critical service-learning (Mitchell 2008), to examine one's relationship with others in architectural education. *Othering* is "a process of figuring out how one differs from and how one is similar to another that ultimately yields understanding and respect of self and other" (Martin and Casault 2005, 3). Post-structuralist approaches to service-learning are founded on the recognition of service-learning as a tool that exposes and questions borders and definitions to better understand teaching, learning, self, and otherness (Butin 2003). The foundations of this trajectory include the questioning of the classroom as a confined space, the prioritizing of projects and activities bridging the classroom and the community; the promotion of reflection within the context of critical service or engaged learning as a central pedagogical tool that allows for the questioning of roles beyond the teaching and learning dichotomy; the strategic frontloading of dialogues in/outside of the classroom on issues of disparity, systemic injustice, structural disadvantages in education, dwelling, and urban life; and the creation of a safe space for students to share preconceived ideas, prejudices, and fears towards self-awareness and personal growth.

A few examples from the curriculum at SACD can serve to illustrate *othering* in design education. A critical service-learning course, Teaching and Learning the City, was developed and taught by the first author multiple times between 2011 and 2019. In this course graduate architecture students learn about pedagogy, and develop and facilitate a design curriculum with one class from a local elementary or middle or high school in Detroit for one semester (Figure 1). Outcomes of this course have been investigated and demonstrate significant transformation in students' perspectives, conceptualizations about self, self+other and self+society, and career plans (Bernasconi 2020b; Bernasconi

et al. 2019). A second example is the Public Interest Design Studio, a mandatory fourth year studio. In the studio, students collaboratively develop urban and architectural strategies for a safe and equitable neighborhood, in a Detroit neighborhood partnering with a local nonprofit organization. Community input frames the studio as well as research, urban analysis, and the understanding of current initiatives in the area. The final multi-scale proposals integrate local assets, prioritizing innovative reuse of buildings and vacant land. The studio utilizes the HOPE model which integrates human, organizational, physical and economic development and allows for the building in of interdisciplinary approaches. This process can be understood as a form of exogenous interdisciplinarity.

*Complementing*. The second trajectory focuses on the importance of surpassing competitive approaches to architectural education toward collaborative modes of learning. *Complementing* can be thought of as a strategy that recognizes individual strengths, multiple intelligences, and diverse perspectives. Collaboration and co-creation (co-production) has been at the center of the discourse on teaching and learning for several decades, including more recently collaboration across in-person, hybrid, and virtual modes of instruction (e.g. Rodriguez et al. 2016). Collaborative skills are recognized as not only central to pedagogy but also are considered desirable at the professional level. We claim that a further step in the direction of embracing learning as social endeavor is the more strategic building upon opportunities that lie in diversity. How can the curriculum support and exploit individual differences rather than promote homogeneity? The question of thresholds, and sets of minimum outcomes met, inform conversations regarding accreditation and assessment. How can those conversations be more compatible with the recognition of human individual richness?

In order to move towards addressing such questions, we advocate for increased nimbleness in exploring multiple

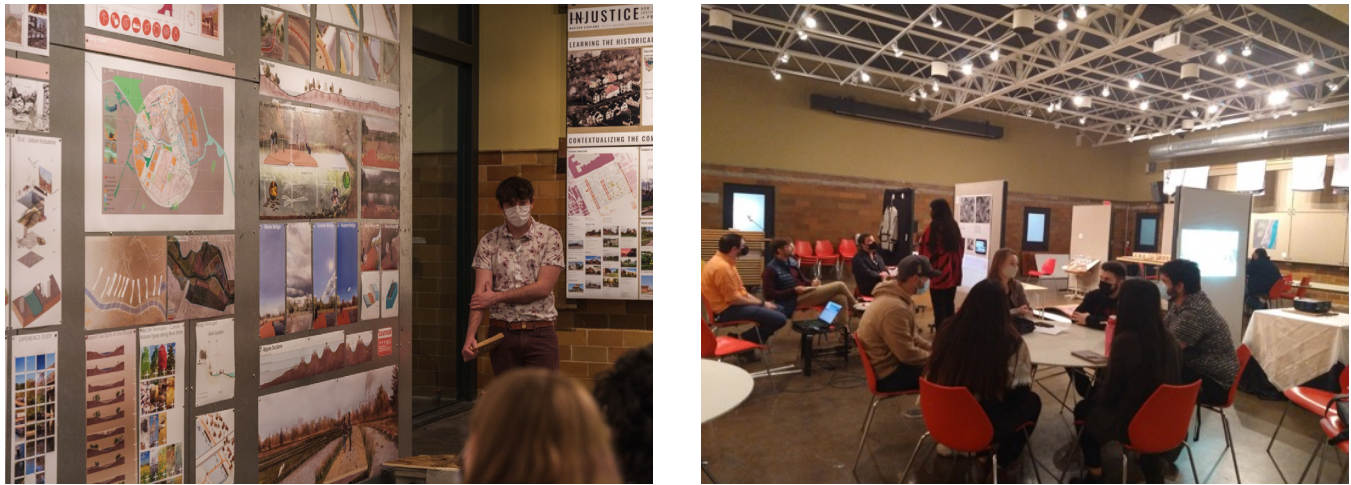


Figure 2. Thesis Studio and Thesis Research Methods course: towards *complementing* in education. Photo Credit: C. Bernasconi.

modes of collaboration in conjunction with multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches as a tool for creating a learning environment capable of hosting and nurturing individual differences as well as supporting communities, groups, and subgroups. Such approaches are aligned with inquiry-based learning, in which frameworks, questions and methods are by nature transdisciplinary, as well as with the prioritizing of personal agency of students over disciplinary *modus operandi* and a body of knowledge which may dictate stricter boundaries of thought and action. Graduate thesis investigations, in this respect, have a considerable potential of resulting in transformative learning and *complementing*. For example, at SACD the Thesis Studio and the Thesis Research Methods course, a mandatory two-semester graduate seminar attended by all graduate students, operate concurrently (Figure 2).

While in the studio students develop a self-directed process to investigate a self-identified topic, in the Research Methods course the entire graduate cohort meets and collaborates weekly, working on peer review and cross-pollination of ideas across the individual thesis topics iteratively, from the initial thesis proposal statement to interim reviews and thesis drafts and the final preparation for the final review. This course makes room for a lengthy collaborative process which involves dialogue, sharing of perspectives, research resources and findings, and allows for the conceptual development of each student to deepen, and the research and design to become more specific and rigorous through a more unstructured and horizontal learning. This process of *complementing* has been successfully tested both in person and in a hybrid or fully online modality.

Another example of *complementing* is the mandatory fourth-year course Psychology of the Environment, often co-taught by faculty at SACD and faculty from the Psychology department, which introduces students the understanding of socio-behavioral aspects of space, and to experimenting with qualitative and quantitative research methods to study the built

and natural environment. Other examples of *complementing* involve interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary learning, such as the course The Digital Image in Space, designed and taught for multiple years by the first author, in which architecture and digital media studies students collaborate with theater students and faculty for a university theater production. This studio requires students to investigate and spatialize themes as presented in the play, and places students within a professional setting and a real-world project, through coordination with the director, professional actors, and stage managers. Other examples of *complementing* involve co-teaching of faculty from various disciplines, collaborating in the definition of course objectives and methods, and teaching to students from various disciplines in the same course.

*De-Gendering*. The third trajectory includes an earnest critique of established theory and praxes of education and design through the acknowledgement of gendered perspectives in the discipline. *De-gendering* involves not merely ongoing discussions of underrepresentation of non-men in both academia and professional leadership, but most importantly the examining of the deeper and structural conundrum at the origin of the discipline and its tools. An analogy with decolonizing can be made as the processes of de-gendering and decolonizing bear forms of intersectionality. Decolonizing and depatriarchalizing approaches to design and research begin with the uncovering of underlining beliefs, motivations, and values that drive the discipline's scopes, boundaries, methods, and tools (Smith 2012; Wilson 2008). In fact, at the root of the decolonizing critique is the idea that "[...] the scholarly apparatus - theories, concepts, and methods - originating in dominant (western) culture always carries with it the ideologies of its origins." (Rogal 2015, 2).

Similarly, de-patriarchalizing, as a form of de-gendering, requires confronting the established exclusionary male-dominated methods and traditions of education, research, and practices of architecture. How can the long-standing prioritization of formal,

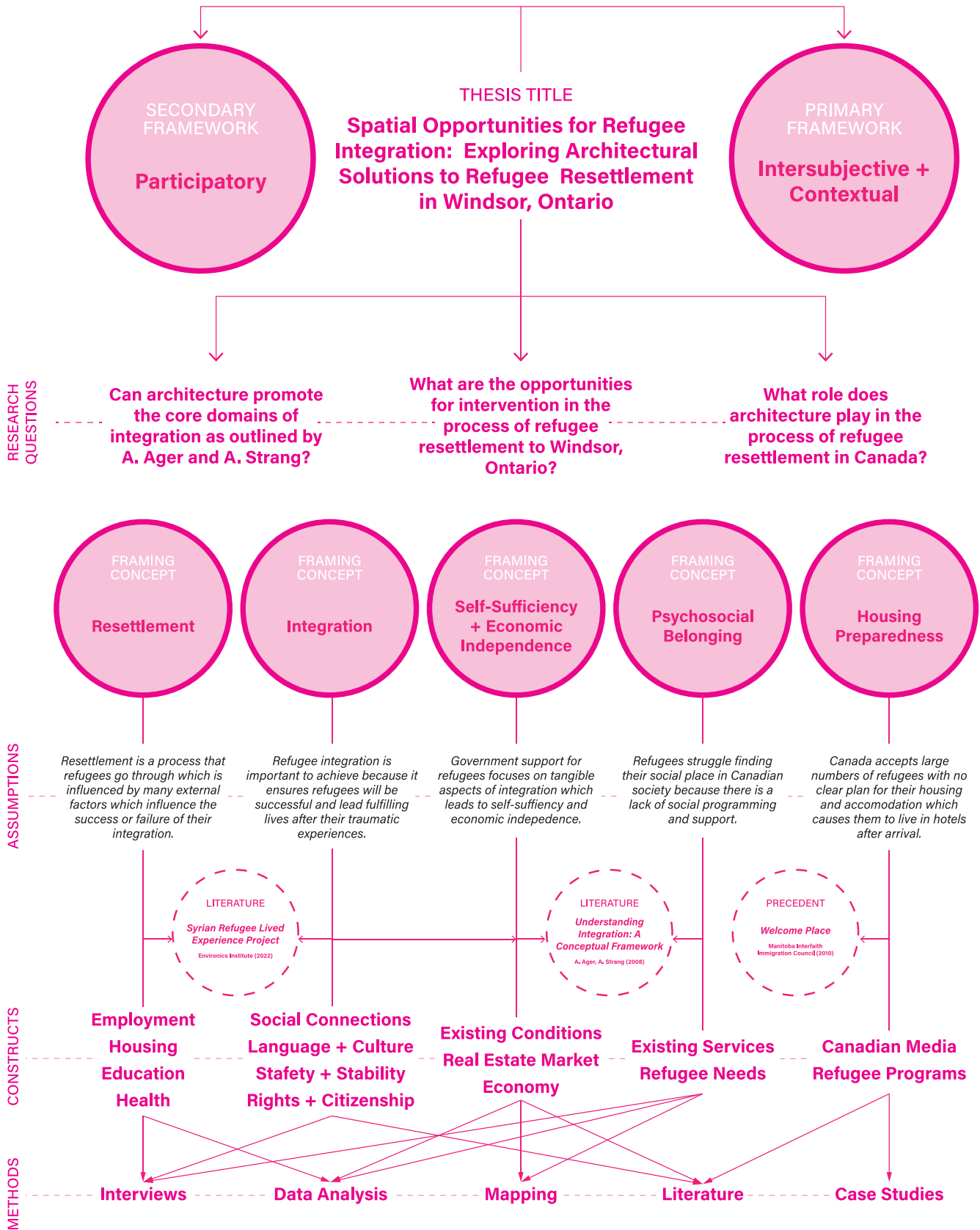


Figure 3. Conceptual and Methodological Diagram for the Thesis Research Methods course: towards *de-gendering* in education. Work by Mona Makki.

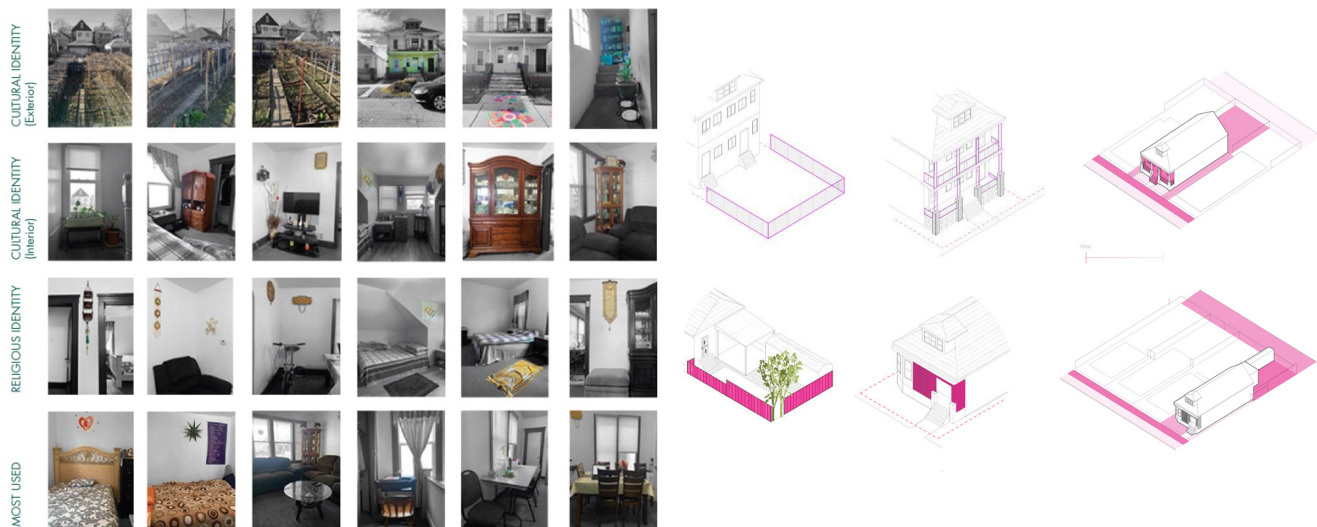


Figure 4. Mixed Methods including ethnographic and spatial-typological studies: towards *de-gendering* in education. Work by Shajnin Dristy.

spatial, and phenomenological approaches in architectural education over experiential, intersubjective, contextual, and socio-cultural understandings of architectural and urban spaces be understood and measured in light of patriarchal origins and traditions of theory, education, and praxis of the discipline? Spatial, formal, and tectonic questions, traditionally at the center of the discipline, are not to be avoided, but it is necessary to take a stern look at the apparatus educators continue to revert to by default, potentially unknowingly even in those cases in which they may be claiming to be adopting other frameworks and approaches, such as frameworks related to social, socio-cultural or justice aspects of design.

We argue that gendered differences in approaches to space, movement, and behavior (Rendell et al. 2002) and the homogeneous male-dominated power and authority in academia and the profession have favored an emphasis on methods and tools centered around abstract, fixed, and what can be argued are willfully thought of as objective conceptualizations of architectural and urban environments. Such representations *de facto* devalue lived experiences, their narratives, diversity, and multiplicity, and promote approaches that elude reality and its complexity. *De-gendering* thus requires the dismantling of aestheticizing and self-referential approaches in education (for example, “what only architects can understand and appreciate”), the demystifying of intuition, and its generalizable value, and the acceptance of it as a cultural construct, as every culture has epistemic concepts and processes that drive individual judgements and reasoning, and the reckoning of positionality and bias as starting points of any design and educational discourse, adopting the motto “I am where I think” (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2006, 215), and the embracing of clarity about conceptual frameworks (“Is every architect a positivist or post-positivist?”) and research methods employed in teaching and

practice (What data are we considering? How are we gathering, sorting and reducing it?).

An example of *de-gendering* the curriculum at SACD is constituted by the already mentioned Thesis Research Methods course, which assists students in identifying primary and secondary conceptual frameworks in their initial phases of research to clearly identify the related bodies of literature, and the established or emerging framing concepts and approaches within the intellectual context of the thesis topic. Students in the course iteratively define and refine the intent of the investigation, central problematization, or research questions, define constructs (i.e. the measurable aspects of the identified framing concepts) and begin to envision appropriate methods and tactics for gathering data and new understandings. Figure 3 includes one example of a conceptual and methodological diagram that thesis candidates use to visualize the system of enquiry they are designing during the thesis process. This diagram is iteratively edited and reworked throughout the thesis year. The frameworks and framing concepts captured in the diagram provide clarity, reliability, and accountability, and require awareness of positionality and of conceptualizations used to frame the issue or phenomena as a premise to the surfacing of questions, intentions, or problematizations. The approach and the tool of diagramming prompt students to unequivocally locate methods that are consistent with frameworks adopted, and to gain intentionality and direction with regard to what sort of data or understanding each method is geared towards.

The conceptual and methodological clarity of the thesis foundations allows for each thesis topic to gain research and design quality that is founded on unambiguous and rigorous processes. For example, a thesis investigation entitled *Microcommunity: Opportunities in the Heart of Small Urban Spaces* by Logan Kaiser investigated spatial, temporal, and social aspects of micro

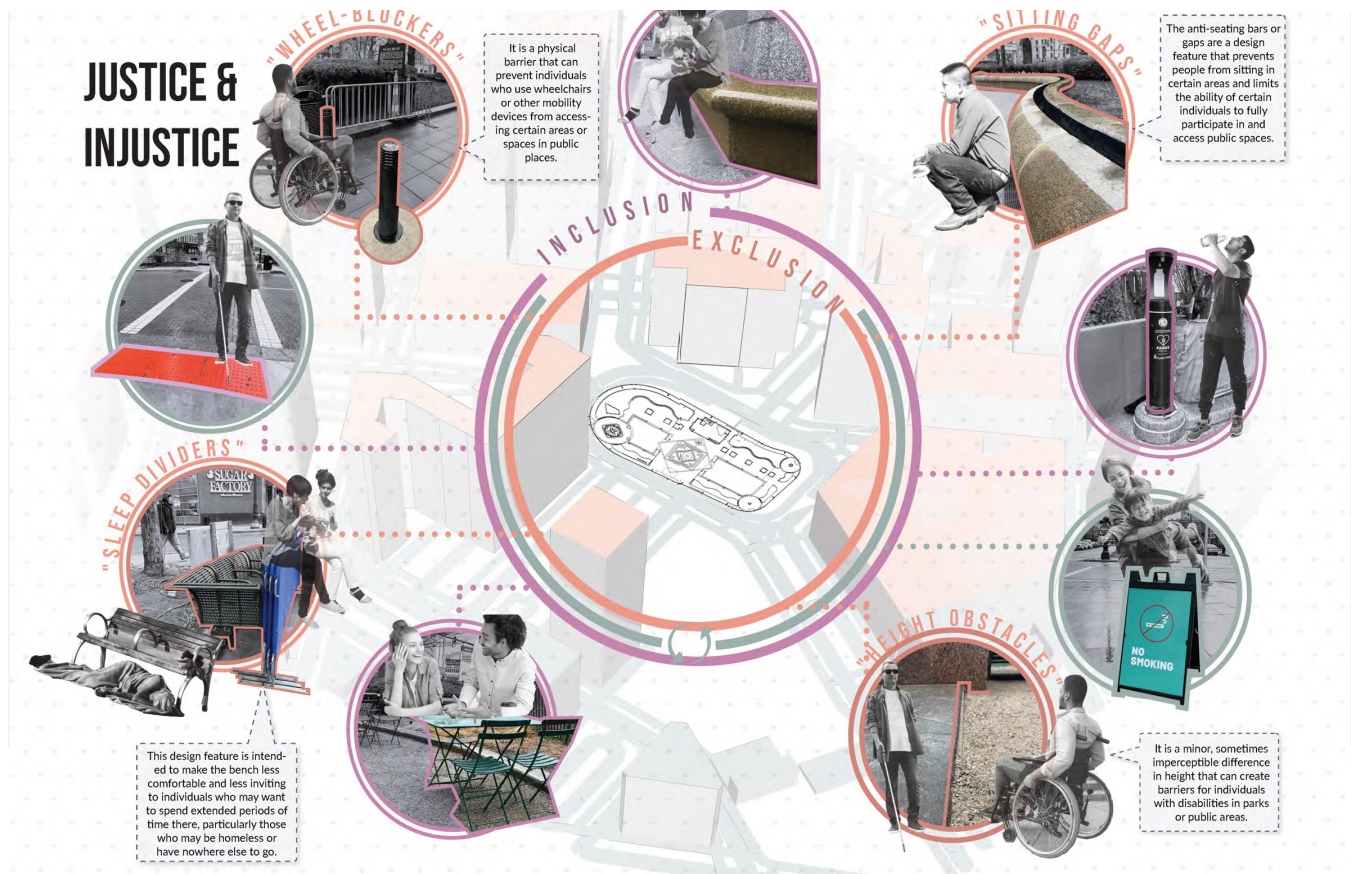


Figure 5. The analysis of spatial injustice: towards *de-gendering* in education. Urban Analysis course, Winter 2023. Instructor: Prof. Virginia Stanard. Work by Cederick Campbell Jr.

communities and adopted a clear intersubjective framework (taking into account social groups, and their sense of belonging and shared experiences); whereas a thesis investigation entitled *First Quarter Recovery* by Dallas Mahaney adopted a clear post-positivist approach, looking mostly at quantitative data to design a buoyant post-disaster relief structure in Texas. Other theses, such as this one by Dristy Shajnin, entitled *Being to Belonging*, used a mixed-method approach comprising, for example, ethnographic studies on cultural use of residential space and spatial typological studies in the Banglatown and Mexicantown neighborhoods of Detroit (Figure 4).

Another example of *de-gendering* is the fourth-year Urban Analysis course, in which students analyzed inclusion and exclusion in a public space in Detroit. Figure 5 shows an example of a study of Campus Martius in downtown Detroit. Students documented the mechanisms and elements of spatial justice and injustice, considering the “weapons of exclusion and inclusion” (Interboro Partners, 2021). Similarly, the Public Interest Design studio adopts a clear co-constructed framework by listening to narratives that stem from what is truly real, as it is experienced and has meaning for the residents, providing for a real basemap that is not fantasized, purified, and biased by positionality and patriarchal heritage of tools and methods. A final example of

*de-gendering* is this third-year studio, taught by Professor Allegra Pitera, which confronted intersubjective approaches to the body, movement, and space through enquiry-based learning. As an example of an inquiry-based project included in the studio, one student connected with three individuals who employ prosthetics to understand their lived experience and design improved prosthetics based on their input. The final hybrid prosthetics Installation project prompted visitors at the exhibit to measure prosthetics on their abled bodies through projection mapping.

## CONCLUSIONS

To holistically embrace the human, social, psychological, and emotional aspects of transformative pedagogies as a central aspect of the architectural curriculum requires prioritizing education of the whole person, as well as recognizing the individual as a member of a community, of a society, of a nation. Aestheticizing approaches to the discipline of architecture have hindered the adoption of more encompassing multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches to architectural education that acknowledge pressing social issues and the envisioning of complex solutions and call for approaches aligned with exogenous interdisciplinarity (Klein 2012). Transformative pedagogies thus require re-examining course

offerings founded on the formal, spatial, and phenomenological aspects of architecture from a dominant white male, individual perspective and re-centering the discussion on the socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-environmental, socio-behavioral aspects of architecture (Pulver et al. 2018).

The three trajectories of *othering*, *complementing*, and *de-gendering* presented in this paper can support transformative design education. The transformative pedagogies we have discussed are not exclusionary but rather coexist, complement, and reinforce each other. Engaged learning provides students with the ability to question themselves and understand themselves in relation to others. Acknowledging diversity in learning and embracing complementary skills and interests together with multi/inter/transdisciplinary perspectives promotes openness and inclusiveness in architectural education. Understanding how gender has shaped the architectural profession and education sheds light on the hidden roots of traditional approaches and allows for considerations of radical uprooting, shifting, and reframing. Together these trajectories provide grounding for the much-needed reshaping of architectural education around shared issues, social justice, and the understanding of individual and shared responsibilities and can become a call for shared actions.

Furthermore, we advocate for further research to understand transformative dimensions of the practice of architecture and of the initiation into such practice, as “the transformative dimensions of practices have been highlighted in various recent studies in the philosophy of education (cf. English, 2009; Higgins, 2011; Luntley, 2009; Martin, 2009; Strike, 2005). . . disciplines are treated, not merely as superstructures of concepts and principles to be appropriated by students, but as a special form of community with a set of standards, values and ... ideals that shape the identity of those initiated into it. As such, practices embody a form of community that can be called *aspirational*” (Yacek 2020, 270).

To conclude, the National Architecture Accreditation Board (NAAB 2020) has recently revised a traditional approach to the assessment of architectural learning outcomes at the national level to include more qualitative and more holistic evaluations of curricula. Inclusion of Shared Values of the Discipline and Profession, such as Lifelong Learning, Leadership, Collaboration, and Community Engagement, and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, suggests that accreditation can become an important external force to spur more transformative approaches to architectural education; however, it is imperative that schools promote an internal discussion around the philosophical and ethical underpinnings that inform and sustain the curriculum and the teaching methods. In addition to evaluating what is being taught at the curricular level, a reassessing of what is most valued is necessary: How do mission, vision, and identity align with pressing needs and issues? In particular, questions to be asked include questions related to skills, experiences, voices, or

knowledge intentionally or inadvertently undervalued, ignored, and moved to peripheral areas of the curriculum. Although such considerations are too often delegated to university-level services and programs, transformative pedagogies in architectural education can promote a process of examining discrepancies or gaps between what is *valued* and what is *evaluated*.

1. 2: 5-22. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0012.101>

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