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A PRELIMINARY THOUGHT ON THE TRANSITORY NATURE OF FIRST-YEAR ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS IN UITM CAWANGAN SARAWAK

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Abstract: This study examines the transitional challenges that first-year architecture students face at UiTM Cawangan Sarawak, transitioning from layperson to systematic architectural design thinking. Grounded in postcolonial theory and the political economy of space, the research explores how colonial-capitalist ideology is perpetuated in historical pedagogical structures, engendering problems in students' production of creative works. Observations during tutorials and critiques reveal that students often assume passive roles, resulting in the underutilisation of design archetypes in their creative expressions. The study addresses two primary objectives: (1) to evaluate students' reflections on their experiences during tutorial and critique sessions, and (2) to define and reflect on the problem of the transitory nature of the first-year architecture programme. The paper identifies incongruities between field experts and laypersons as the central issue through a mixed-methods approach, combining postactivity surveys, student evaluations, and literature reviews. The outcomes provide fundamental insights into a problem of definition in the first-year architecture programme. By situating the study within the broader discourse of inclusive education, this paper calls for a study that views the problem from the perspective of the tutors and, consequently, their teaching and learning approach as the central inquiry. This paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue on innovation in architectural pedagogy, emphasising a fundamental shift in the discourse towards the core of teaching and learning: the dynamic of teaching and learning.

Keywords: Architectural Pedagogy, Design Studio Teaching and Learning, The Problem of Definition, Decolonised Education, Participatory Studio





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Introduction

First Year as The Transition Period

Design studio is the core course in the architectural degree programme provided at UiTM Kampus Samarahan. The students register and undergo the course from Part 1 (Year 1, Semester 1) until Part 8 (Year 4, Semester 2). Each subsequent design course increases in intensity and complexity, where students are expected to build upon the previously learnt objectives. Let's first consider the students who have already been properly inducted into the programme, Year 2 onwards. The challenge for them is to build upon the architectural subject matters they had previously acquired. However, the challenge is entirely different for those who are just starting their Year 1 – building the foundational design vocabulary for their design studies. This is the crucial period during which students transition into a highly specialised field. This is the year when students are first introduced to the architectural design discipline, a systematic and creative problem-solving method that culminates in an architectural expression proposal.

It is worth mentioning that within the UiTM system, three campuses offer an architecture degree programme. For this article, it is sufficient to note that the curriculum is created and managed by the PU with regular feedback sessions with the other two PP. The curriculum itself is designed in such a way that Year 1 students will start with the Design Appraisal studio instead of a Design studio outright. This is to prepare the entry students with the design foundation mentioned previously. In Design Appraisal, the students are expected only to apply design vocabulary in their architectural compositions. The students only need to be able to describe their mixed-media composition using design vocabulary, rather than presenting an outright architectural proposal. However, this approach in addressing the transitioning nature of the Year 1 students presents a unique problem of definition that centres around the foreign vocabulary used to communicate creative works in the architecture programme.

As previously stated, the Year 1 students are just getting familiarised with the highly specialised field. This is unlike the faculty, whose thinking is much more developed and mature, having been trained in both academic and industrial practices. Their vocabulary usage is much more nuanced and complex, and they can combine different vocabulary to describe various forms of creative output definitively. This prominent skill gap further highlights the problem of definition that Year 1 students face and illuminates a distinctive hierarchy within the studio setting that prevents impactful teaching and learning. Consequently, the teaching and learning process as a social unit failed to effectively transition the Year 1 student into the architecture field.

The effect of the deeply hierarchical structure within the studio is more effectively understood in the context of the historical development of formal architecture schools, which reveals a more fundamental problem of colonial inheritance. Colonial-capitalist ideology is evident in the teaching and learning approach in this preliminary reflection. This ideology, within the context of architecture pedagogy at large, sought to justify the students' inability to attain the learning objectives because of indolence. Other architectural schools, particularly those that embrace design research and participation as an alternative approach to teaching and learning, advocate for an inclusive approach to bridge the gap and establish equal standing between faculty and students. This approach relates fundamentally to the understanding of collective production as described by Creagh, which delves into the urban inhabitants' stake in co-



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producing places in cities (Creagh, 2019). This view can also be traced back to the seminal work of Rossi in his seminal work on the nature of the complex network of social registers in cities. In the case of design studios, the creative works in the design class are a social effort (Rossi, 1982).

This article will attempt to define the nature of the problem of definition faced by the Year 1 architecture students in UiTM Kampus Samarahan, in two parts: (1) reflective reviews on issues of contemporary architecture pedagogy and (2) descriptive analyses on the problem of definition observed in the students. The postcolonial context strongly suggests that this problem also manifests in other schools throughout the nation. However, this article will describe in relation only to the observed phenomenon in UiTM Kampus Samarahan. To articulate the problem, this paper will consider the design studio as a unit of production of creative works. In other words, the teaching and learning within the design studio essentially perform a cultural production that materialises as a creative work. Following this, the paper will establish the connection between the problem and colonial-capitalist ideology through historical inquiry.

A Reflection on Creative Production in Design Studio

The authors approach the study by employing the ethnographic method of immersive participant observation throughout the teaching and learning in the Year 1 architecture studio design. The observation was conducted for fourteen weeks, in accordance with the university's academic calendar. For the population sampling, the design studio consists of twenty-nine students and three lecturers. The students come from a diverse educational background, but all enter the architecture degree programme at UiTM Kampus Samarahan using their SPM results.

Observations were made primarily regarding the student's aptitude in using the design archetype without prompts from the lecturers. Several informal interviews were conducted during the wrap-up sessions following the critique. The two insights are then reinforced with a semi-structured survey at the end of the academic week. Descriptive analysis was then carried out to interpret the observations by reflecting them against the literature on the historical development of architectural pedagogy. The methodology has uncovered a significant causality of the inherited colonial-capitalist ideology within architecture pedagogy, although it is not intended, it is nonetheless problematic.

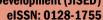
Literature Review

Development of Architectural Pedagogy and Its Inherited Problems

The approach to articulating the problem of definition is by considering design as a cultural production. This begins with the postulation that the mode of production of architectural works in design studios is inherently influenced by the colonial-capitalist ideology inherited from the final years of the colony to the early days of post-independence. This is to say that although pedagogical problem in architecture transcends different agencies, this paper will argue from the perspective of the teaching and learning approach to provide the ground for bridging the evidential and practical gap of an alternative architectural pedagogy.

"The Myth of the Lazy Native" by Alatas is a crucial extension since the seminal work articulates how colonial-capitalist ideology is inherited into the post-independence era. The difference is that now the empire-colony political economy relation manifests within the power hierarchy of organisations (Alatas, 2023 (1977)). This includes the current arrangement of





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design studios in schools with formal architectural education. Suppose the design studio is considered a social group. The power hierarchy within such a studio is distinctive, with members divided into two groups, one having control over the other. This phenomenon, as argued by O'Connor in his paper, showed that students felt overwhelming pressure throughout their learning process, especially when assessed during the critique session. The author further argues that this problem stems from the lack of equal footing between the faculty and the students in the design studio (O'Connor, 2023). Viewing this power inequality within the context of creative works as cultural production, we can infer that the colonial-capitalist approach is inadvertently shaping the teaching and learning in architectural schools.

Architecture as a formally structured education can be traced back to the establishment of the Académie d'Architecture in 1671 in France. In the mid-18th century, the academy structured an educational system still practised in many Western architecture schools (Griffin, 2020). During this time, science was undergoing a philosophical revolution, one that Al-Attas argued was the secularisation of thoughts in the Western sphere (Al-Attas, 2021). Architecture was not spared, and through the secularisation, the Académie was later integrated into École des Beaux-Arts, where a student must submit a portfolio before being accepted (Pozdnyakova, 2020). Thus, the school became more individualistic, and the education capitalised on the students' critical thinking. The École taught through studio-based systems or ateliers as the primary space for hands-on learning and critique. These ateliers are commonly led by a practising architect who fosters mentorship and peer learning, strongly emphasising drawing, design, and composition. The students in the ateliers go through a strenuous curriculum, a series of monthly competitions or 'esquisses' and rendering of projects ("The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts," 1975). The outcome of training under the Ecole is the ability to develop concepts effectively and acquire advanced drafting techniques (Paris on the Potomac, 2007).

The shift after World War I saw the secularised architecture reforms again becoming more capitalist, focusing on functionalism and industrialisation. Notwithstanding the school as the site of critical knowledge, it then became the training ground for highly skilled crafters who can produce efficiently for the mass public consumption. This was embodied by the German Bauhaus, founded in 1919 as a craft school (Pozdnyakova, 2020). In the Bauhaus Manifesto, Walter Gropius stated that the school aimed to unify the arts through design education and produce tangible works (Bauhaus-Archiv, 2025). The students were active participants in their curriculum and often engaged in interdisciplinary collaboration with the master craftsman on real-world projects. The method blends combined art (aesthetics) and practical skills (technology) to adapt to the industrial revolution. However, this method was criticised for a lack of sensitivity towards the context, and the design was approached as an individualistic process. Workshops served as hubs for experimentation and research, while the introductory courses aimed to unlock creativity and provide a strong foundation for further study (Bauhaus-Archiv, 2025). This later evolved into the studio-based system now widely adopted in most parts of the world. However, the maturity also reaffirms the system that emphasises competition and critique is a highly ritualised form of evaluation, often hierarchical, subjective, and performative (Flynn, 2023).

Post-independence saw the establishment of architecture schools in Asia to produce local architects and draftsmen (Abdullah, 2022). Most schools are greatly influenced by the École des Beaux-Arts, adopting a studio-based model, with examples including the Sir JJ School of





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Architecture in Mumbai and the Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture, both founded in 1857 and 1924. Some schools have taken the model of Bauhaus with a master-apprentice relationship, with the teacher as the sole authority and the student as a passive recipient (Sara, 2023), as seen at the Southeast University School of Architecture in Nanjing, established in 1927. The development of contemporary architecture education in Asia after World War II was based on challenging colonial legacies and efforts in nation-building while reflecting global architectural ideology (Chang, 2019).

It is at this point that the issue arose, where the pedagogy is based on Western models. The critique sessions, where the design works produced are assessed, reinforce colonial-capitalist power structures by privileging the tutor or guest critic as the authoritative voice and placing students in a submissive position. This undermines learning by instilling in students a fear of judgment rather than encouraging constructive feedback (Flynn, 2023). Brown and Clark criticise the conventional architectural teaching as limiting the students' creativity to the restraints of appeasing the tutor (Brown, 2013). The previous architectural pedagogy has been criticised as a highly individualised attempt, which only concentrates on developing an individual skill set that is often restricted to interaction between the students and their tutor (Mcpeek, 2019). Within this setting, the students in Year 1 with little knowledge of the highly specialised field are especially overwhelmed as they struggle to grasp the design thinking skill demanded within architecture (Pirdavari, 2022).

Participation as an Effective Tool of Architecture Pedagogy

The criticism of conventional architectural pedagogy led to the development of a new method that enhances students' understanding of design from the end-user's perspective and emphasises the collaborative aspect of architectural design. This new approach, known as participatory design, was introduced in architectural pedagogy. The works by Hasanin stated that participation in design is a dynamic process that includes two main parts: (1) an understanding of design that conscientiously attempts to suit the culture of the user (Hasanin, 2013), and (2) an understanding of the user's needs and preferences (Hasanin, 1997). Later studies on urbanism adopted a similar co-design approach and found that the participation of all studio members ensured an impactful learning outcome for the students (Piga, 2021). Hence, simulating the early participatory design model involves conducting participation to gain a more nuanced understanding of people and culture before incorporating them into the production of creative works.

While the earlier approach to participatory design leaned heavily towards the pragmatic dimension, i.e., real client participation and a brief to introduce the real-world practice of architecture, later schools developed a more holistic approach that leverages participation as a tool for teaching and learning. Oxford Brookes University, for example, introduces its Year 1 students to design as a participatory studio through OB1 Live Projects. Here, the programme explicitly aims for the live project to become the site for collaborative actions by the students and clients – both are laypeople – to produce the creative works on equal footing (Anderson & Priest, 2012). In the same article, the author has argued that the students and clients are both very receptive to discussions of the project development as they were communicating using layman terms, in addition to the tutor's flexible role to mediate and reconcile the process so the projects see the conclusion in time (Anderson & Priest, 2012). Thus, the participation is not





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only for achieving 'real' architecture, but also a site for critical knowledge, where the works are created and reinterpreted in different languages (Saxena, 2023).

The deliberate placement of the live project in Year 1 was also part of the pedagogic approach at Oxford Brookes University. Soft induction into architecture is achieved through the same site of knowledge where architecture is discussed in layman's terms. With this experiential reference, the tutors have the prerequisite to give more impactful architectural inputs that the students can better reflect upon. This is where the tutors' flexibility in assuming their roles is crucial. Not only could they mediate the creative production to follow the objective of the course, but they also participated as the faculty to give the formal teaching and learning following the project's progression (Anderson & Priest, 2014).

Another example of participatory design worth mentioning is the Live Project by the Sheffield School of Architecture. In her 2004 case study on the Sheffield Live Project, Rachel Sara defined the term as projects carried out in design class that teach specific methods in practice, such as community design, public interest design or development and emergency practice (Sara, 2004). The definition was further extended by Anderson and Priest in 2014, Shtebunaev in 2016, and Sabree in 2023 to a design project that approaches teaching and learning with a situational model where the tutors initiate the problems, and – following a postmodernist model – focuses on the process rather than the end product (Anderson & Priest, 2014; Sabree, 2023; Shtebunaev, 2016). Therefore, the approach by the Sheffield School of Architecture delineated the liberation of the end products as more experimental rather than traditional, with the characteristic of an "unbuilt" architecture being equally acknowledged as "real" architecture.

The vertical studio participation is also structured in Sheffield's Live Project. This cultivated: (1) mentorship-like interactions between different years of the Master in Architecture, and (2) interchangeable skills exchange between the Master in Architecture and Taught Postgraduate Master (Brown, 2012). In this case, participation was further nuanced by having a project unit comprising Year 2, along with a mixture of other Postgraduate Taught Programmes. A case study from South Africa also agreed that having a highly dynamic design studio with an approach to the project that celebrates participation of the community and "unfinished" works provides a ground for the live projects to have an impactful experimental teaching and learning (Abrahams, 2021).

In both cases, live projects applied participatory design pedagogy by providing a real-world platform where students were directly involved with users and stakeholders, transforming the intangible pedagogical concept into tangible, community-based learning experiences. Although the "live" part of the project itself, i.e., participating in real project briefs with clients, became an alternative introduction to the design studio, this paper will consider the act of participating itself to be the ground for critical teaching and learning, and inducting Year 1 students into the field of architecture. This is to avoid limiting the participants to student-clients only, following the trajectory outlined by the postmodern school of architecture.

Transitioning into Design Thinking and the Problem of Definition

The crucial juncture of Year 1 in inducting laypeople into architecture has been reflected in the previous section. So far, the article has provided two primary examples of the latter approach of Live Projects as the site of a participatory design studio, an alternative teaching and learning





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method that is inclusive and better suited to the Year 1 students. This situation demands alternative approaches to design studio pedagogy to facilitate the transition into a highly specialised field.

Through the authors' involvement with the design studio for Year 1 students at UiTM Kampus Samarahan, a contradiction was observed between the students' self-reflection on their knowledge attainment and their actual assessment throughout the semester. Several interjecting interviews and short reflection surveys were conducted to gauge the students' attainment of learning objectives. From their perspective, most claimed to correctly understand the application of the architecture archetype (design vocabulary). This came as no surprise and was valid to a certain extent, because when, for example, the formative assessment was done through discussions in critique sessions and tutorials, the student demonstrated a lack of skills to connect the terminologies coherently to describe their creative works. However, they could eloquently articulate their works using layperson terminology they were already familiar with.

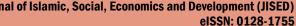
From these early observations and grounds of reasoning, we can safely postulate that the transitory nature of the Year 1 manifests as these difficulties in "speaking in architectural vocabularies". It is a problem of definition – a fundamental problem when someone finds challenges in merging two or more concepts into one coherent whole (Al-Attas, 2018). Therefore, we can confirm that the fundamental problem that the Year 1 architecture students in UiTM Kampus Samarahan experience is not due to secondary factors, such as an outdated syllabus or a lack of infrastructure, but the approach to teaching and learning of the design studio itself, where the current tradition is unable to assist in the transitions of the Year 1 students effectively.

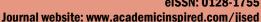
Furthermore, this problem does not exist in isolation. One of the elements that was found to complicate it further is the design archetype itself. Many of the terminologies are borrowed from a common word (Ching, 2023). When used in architecture, the definition and its parameters may become completely foreign—the word "transformation", for example. In design, "transformation" can be defined as the gradual changes in various parameters, such as geometry, proportion, and colour. As part of the Year 1 design studio, learning to apply and integrate the design terminologies first implies understanding their definitions. However, these terminologies are precise compared to, following the previous example, just a transformation in its shape, as the students prematurely defined in layman's terms.

Political Economy Approach to the Production of Creative Work

The students' struggle to describe the definition of their creative works and the process was paired with the passive roles they assumed during discussions. Examining the design studio as a unit of creative work production reveals a clear hierarchical structure within the studio. During the immersive study, the faculty assumes the role of authority, with their presence being dominant. Additionally, the current practice of discussion sessions involves having students justify their creative development process in front of the panel. Therefore, for the design studio, it is crucial for the students to "defend" their works. The students reflected on this as the main workload of their studio and agreed that they almost always did not have enough time to produce a significant development to be put up for discussion. Furthermore, a recurring trend emerges in the discussions: they were usually met with silence when tutors made enquiries and gave critique. Therefore, the production of creative works is inhibited, as negotiations for







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production seldom occur, and the authoritative power controls the submissive nature of creative work. To understand the historical development of architecture schools in Malaysia, it is worth noting how the strict hierarchy within the colonial social group was inherited and became problematic for Year 1 students transitioning into architecture.

A more nuanced understanding of the studio's mode of production can be gained when we consider the design studio as a social group. This paper has argued that producing creative works in the design studio involves rigorous negotiation and mediation. Therefore, the production should be social. Nonetheless, as explained previously, the current production dynamic is unimpactful on teaching and learning, as the faculty position is highly authoritative. This lack of participation in social production can also be observed within student subgrouping. In light of the inherited colonial-capitalist ideology, the students in Year 1 were seen to focus more of their production effort on their individual projects. This was apparent when the creative works were compared with one another. Differences in quality, specifically in the design vocabulary, expressions, and workmanship, between the group and individual projects were evident in the submitted works. For their final assessment, production efforts were clearly evident in the finished presentation boards and models of the individual projects. Additional development was demonstrated after the last critique session, showing a further attempt to express the creative works. This contrasts with the group projects, where no additional development was attempted.

This individualist tendency started to manifest as the critiques started to categorise students according to their level of maturity, seemingly. The comparative reflection of the students' work, as one of the formative assessments, was deemed necessary to cultivate peer learning among the students. However, it engendered a very individualistic approach to production, where impactful negotiations between students were less considered as the core method in creating their creative works. Thus, there is little participatory learning between the students, observed in Year 1. Throughout the immersive study, the impactful participations, where negotiations between all social group members must occur during the production, were not enculturated. This has caused Year 1 students to struggle in their transition into the architecture programme at UiTM Kampus Samarahan, as evidenced by their average learning attainment at the end of their semester.

Conclusion

The arguments presented in this article led to the preliminary description of the problem of definition that Year 1 architecture students face at UiTM Kampus Samarahan. This problem was not shown to exist in isolation, but rather originated from the inheritance of a strict hierarchical structure of colonial capitalism within the studio unit, which hampers the creative production of architectural expressions. The problematic pedagogical approach of colonialcapitalist is unhelpful to the students' transition into the architecture programme, considering that the production of architectural expressions from the social science point of view necessitates negotiations. In other words, the production is a collective effort that requires participation by all social group members. In conclusion, the article recommends a study to delineate the problem's parameters further and develop a more effective participatory approach in design studio pedagogy to address the transitory nature of Year 1 and its associated problem of definition.



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