

Ethnographic Ways of Architectural Knowing: A Pre-design Pedagogy for Radical Inclusion

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The global response of architectural education to recent calls for social and epistemic justice has been to inaugurate the project of decolonising pedagogy and curricula, a project which admits a historical failure to respond to diverse social needs. This paper proposes ethnography as a decolonial method capable of disrupting — and evolving — normative architectural approaches to ‘site’. As a method used to access, engage, and interpret often unacknowledged cultural worlds, ethnography has overcome its own historical complicity with colonialism. This paper draws upon two Master’s level projects which appropriate and apply ethnography to two architectural and urban contexts marked by geopolitics: London and Nicosia. The paper situates the projects within a wider teaching practice which pre-dates the current interventionist diversity paradigm. The paper also elaborates on the pedagogic context of the projects, which values emotion, lived experience and embodied relations to spatial and material environments as legitimate sources of knowledge. The pedagogy also facilitates close attention to reflexivity within design-research projects. This attention, therefore, requires students’ heightened self-awareness as cultural subjects, bringing their own cultural resources and bias to bear on the contexts they engage. This self-awareness engenders a form of ‘virtuous and productive self-doubt’ and thus involves a distancing from the figure of the architect-hero.

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