

## Teeming Progressions

*How architects are moving away from traditional roles and adapting radical ones*

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Until very recently, I believed that it was impossible for teamwork to be as successful and fulfilling as working solo, especially in the studio. Teamwork posed too many unconquerable hurdles, such as reconciling with people who have conflicting opinions, priorities and varying skill-sets which inevitably led to the most loathed concept of all: compromise. I have always been an advocate of individualism, and I had no patience for other people. Looking back, I realize that this self-centered attitude cost me quite a few successes as well as the chance to learn from my peers and deal with challenges integral to the work of every designer.

For an architect, design is never the end of the process, perhaps only the beginning. Making one's designs a reality is the true manifestation of an architect's ability. In design lies potential; in implementation lies success. While design can be conceived individually, it takes a team of members working together to implement it.

This is an excerpt from something I had written four years ago, in architecture school:

*"Group work in design further hinders the learning process. In groups, a few students (who consider themselves good designers) take over and design everything while the rest of the members are put to drafting, and never get to design anything themselves. There is no learning involved, only labor."*

My belief was not radically shaken until a couple of months ago, after I joined the Design Research Lab, and had been through two intensive workshops. Teamwork is an integral part of the structure of the DRL, which initially did not go down well with most students, who were used to working alone and receiving individual, personalized criticism on their work. The first term was a phase of confusion, through which different students experimented with different ways of working in these self-organized teams. The following are the prevailing attitudes I have observed in the studio:

*"I am team leader. I must convince or force the others to see and agree to my point of view."*

*"It's me against the team. I must work harder and progress faster in order to have my ideas implemented."*

*"I am the follower. I will pick the most convincing argument and back it up. Withholding my ideas will mean one less voice, and less conflict."*

*"We are a team. We must not move to the next step without gaining full approval from each team member."*

All the above are detrimental attitudes, but ultimately, there is truth in each, and it is a blend of each of these techniques that will ensure successful teamwork.

*Culture & Studio Subculture* To quote the oft-repeated cliché, no man is an island. The contrary is also true, because no two minds think alike. No two people come from the exact same background, social, cultural, academic or professional, no two people have shared the same experiences, and even if they have, no two people are affected the same way or learn the same things from these experiences. Every man is thus an island, but since no man can remain so, we must find solutions to remain connected to each other and move beyond personal differences to succeed as a team. The DRL being the most international graduate program in the world, cultural differences are probably at the forefront of the problems students are faced with in groups. Communication gaps constantly hinder the flow of ideas, which forces us to use different ways to get our thoughts across. This actuates a process of learning to communicate via means other than the verbal. The language of architects is, after all, graphical. Studio culture varies from continent to continent and from school to school. Ways and methods of working that we are used to may have to be discarded or adapted to suit the current studio and team. We learn to be more flexible about schedule, spaces constraints and methods of addressing design issues.

*Criticism* One pitfall that can immediately be identified in working individually is that students tend to take criticism *personally*, and find it difficult to differentiate between professional and personal comments. This is eliminated in group work, where criticism and feedback from juries is taken more seriously for what it is rather than dwelling on ambiguous comments that could be personal.

*Self-evaluation* Ideas in a team must first be presented to other team members before they are taken to the next stage. This ensures self-criticism and convincing presentation at different levels. The resulting work is more fine-tuned and comes from a solid foundation after having passed through many channels before being approved. The importance of presentation and communication cannot be undermined in this process.

*Feedback Loop* Team-based studio work facilitates learning from peers as a by-product of the design process. As team members come from different academic and professional backgrounds, a platform is created not only to share their experiences and skill-sets, but also to apply them into a plural, multi-layered project. This is an experience which cannot be obtained from peers working on different projects, as working on a single project together means that each member has the same stake in the final outcome.

*Authorship* The concept of ownership/authorship of ideas is slowly dissolving into an open-source sharing system. Ideas are now freely shared without remaining within the boundaries of

their origin. Ideas conceived by one person may be further developed by another. The elimination of a closed-loop of ownership allows many minds to work on and take existing projects to different levels, perhaps even resulting in diverse possibilities with a single starting point.

While it may be difficult, challenging and extremely nerve-wracking, I am now an advocate of team-based studio work. Working with others from the same field offers different takes on one situation, which is not otherwise possible for one mind to conceive. It also teaches self-criticism and self-evaluation, which is necessary for the success of a live project. Stepping away from the project, even while working alone, can offer fresh perspective and bring forth new problems and solutions. There are many real-life skills to be learned from teamwork, which will be useful in the professional arena, where working closely with inter-disciplinary professionals is inevitable. Collaboration is where all disciplines are eventually headed.

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