

Interview: Chair of Unlearning

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interviewed by Eva-Maria Ciesla and Hannah Strothmann

Eva-Maria Ciesla, Hannah Strothmann | *The three of you established the first student-led chair at the TU Munich in 2022. How would you describe your ambition to collectively intervene in architectural education and to transform architecture as a discipline?*

Elena Spatz, Lisa André, Marie Gnesda | When we entered university in 2018 and began our architecture studies, we searched for methods to deal responsibly with the material, social, and economic layers of our present polycrisis. We've reached the point where the persistent warnings about the climate crises are no longer abstract theories but realities felt within our own bodies. In 2020, we reached the point where George Floyd's murder once again highlighted the deadly racist abuse of power by the police. We've reached the point where architecture is co-opted by right-wing politics to close doors and build walls.

However, we could not find these discourses in our basic teaching. We were surprised by this apolitical attitude. How could architecture, a discipline that places the human at its center, be taught without specifically addressing the power dynamics and their effect on each human?

Feminist, BIPOC, queer, and disabled activists have always pointed out how architecture is complicit in materializing norms in the built structure and creates invisibility for the »abject body« (Butler 1993) that differs from the proclaimed neutral, universal, and rational subject – while the basic framework of architectural teaching still exaggerates the supposed universality that finds its origins in cis-male proportions (Vitruvian man; Modulor) and male-coded values (rationality; geometric order; discipline). After entering the university we realized that the institution not only reproduces these Eurocentric and patriarchal values but also that the university's door itself is not open to anyone. Sara Ahmed states, »It can

appear as if some people just fit, rather than they fit because of how the structure was built» (Ahmed 2023: 167). It is important to recognize the hegemonic fabricated structure behind the open doors to point the finger at it and uncover »how they have doors opened [...] because of how they speak, how they act, because of their connections« (ibid.).

Recognizing the blind spots and injustices within our own context left us with a bitter taste of discomfort and feeling separated from each other. For this reason, we decided to transform our feelings into collective action and we used the open format of the »Intervention Class« to call for the student-led Chair of Unlearning. During the 2022 summer semester, we became visible as feminist »parasites« due to interventions on campus, in lectures, and in university discourse.

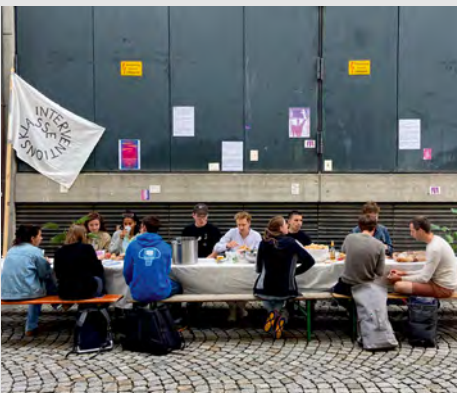
Which techniques and instruments are important for your work? Can you tell us about some of the concrete results of your interventions?

Our discomfort became the driving force behind our interventions and, as Sara Ahmed teaches us, created a connection (2023: 21), binding us together in a common struggle against the dominant university culture and architectural canon. »Distraction« evolved as a logical and intuitive strategy to bring these blind spots to the surface. We couldn't continue expressing our discomfort on a small scale anymore, discussing why the Modulator is not a one-size-fits-all model with fellow students, confronting racist expressions by professors, and addressing the contradiction of an »open-minded« studio culture and the obligatory expensive excursions. Distraction was our tool to express our discomfort on a wider scale. We wondered whether publicly revealing grievances might resonate with other students and encourage them to abandon their comfortable silence. We followed different strategies of distraction within the university context. By breaking the daily visual axis, we drew attention to our leaflets – inspired by the Guerrilla Girls – which addressed how Eurocentric arrogance and normative binary standards are mirrored in architecture. As a student-led chair, exchanging personal discomfort and learning from each other at eye level developed as a core concept, in contrast to the frontal teaching and top-down pedagogy prevalent in the university. Inspired by Harney and Moten's principle of defining »studies as a social event that is not limited to university« (Moten/Harney/Shukaitis 2013: 113), we aimed to destabilize institutional obedience by appropriating spaces for us, »abject



1.

Architektur Woche München — Reflecting on personal discomfort at the workshop self-defence in architecture hosted by COU. © Matthias Faul.



2.

Open Lunch Table — Reflecting on the lecture crash. © Elena Spatz.

bodies»¹. We intruded on the internal structures by crashing lectures in each semester to give a brief insight into the »intersection of architecture, power, and discrimination«. In that context, crashing in does not refer to appearing in lectures without warning, but crashing the comfortable position of professors and students. We asked why we didn't learn about the responsibility of architecture regarding the cementation of colonial interests. We asked if we could separate architects like Adolf Loos from their work. We asked why our daily environment is not only built by predominantly white, privileged people but also for them. These questions have the power to shatter our internalized values and self-perception. In her influential book, *Feeling Power* (1998), Megan Boler argues that creating discomfort is an effective pedagogy which moves between destabilizing our own world views and creating a careful space to step out of our comfort zones. Afterward, we offered an open lunch table outside on campus, inviting everyone to join us to discuss our lecture. People came, some were reassured, some were confused, and some were offended.

We received strong feedback that such a basic seminar about architecture, power, and discrimination was needed. In conclusion, we offered the seminar »Empowering Students' Positions. What Could Teaching For All Look Like?« in the following semester. We wanted to encourage our fellow students to use their voices and stop swallowing daily discrimination and structural injustice. They ought to theoretically analyze one grievance at our architecture department on a structural, curriculum-related, or spatial level, and ultimately make it visible as an intervention on campus. The interventions were all carried out together in one week in a collective action. Finally, the results were presented in the exhibition »Architecture Discriminates« which was accompanied by a symposium, »Unlearning White Architecture Education« in April 2023.

1 In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Judith Butler explains how heteronormative, binary systems create space for »intelligible bodies«, shaping subjects who conform to the socially constructed division between »men« and »women«. »Abject bodies« fail to incorporate normative scripts. They describe how the abjection of others is central to the governance of bodies and the violent materialization of norms.



3.
COU papers in a students' workspace. © Elena Spatz.



4.
Exhibiting the students' work from the seminar Empowering Students' Positions. © Verena Bauer.

What role does architectural knowledge play in your practice and interventions? How is it connected to unlearning?

Given that universities are sites for the reproduction and articulation of norms, questioning these power relations ought to stand at the very beginning of the curriculum. In our seminar, we explored how architectural knowledge is intertwined with questions such as: Who is able to enter the door to academia? Why don't we have more BIPOC and queer professors? How are colonial patterns weaved into the urban fabric? One example of these reflections was the reader's letters² to Sara Ahmed, connecting her concepts like »space invader«, »disorientation«, and »bodies out of place« to the experiences of the participants in their studies. Sitting in the hallway in a circle we read our text snippets aloud and shared the emotions they provoked in each other.

With these small fragments of text, we aimed to build upon the educational practice of »unlearning«, which was introduced by the literary scholar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, unlearning is an act of recognizing and resisting the hegemonic process of instrumentalization, silencing, and powerlessness. As Gayatri Spivak puts it, the possibility of engaging with power relations to change them through teaching and learning is a task that is as necessary as it is unglamorous (Spivak 2012: 66; Sternfeld 2017). María do Mar Castro Varela and Alisha M.B. Heinemann even describe the process of unlearning as an »active critical-collective intervention«, which sets itself the task of »questioning hegemonic knowledge productions – in terms of form, content and protagonists« (2016: 2). The idea is not to understand learning as the opposite of unlearning, but rather to recognize memory and forgetting as important elements in intervening in the production of imperialist subjects (ibid.).

2 Inspired by the zine *Ahmed for Architecture Students*, initiated by Brady Burroughs at KTH Stockholm.

Where do you see the possibilities of transferring your ideas of intervention to everyday architectural education and practice? What should change in the profession?

Our strategies of distraction and unlearning are concerned with creating collective discomfort and revealing structural injustice through interventions. As our final strategy, relearning deals with the transfer of practical demands to architectural education and practice. Our eight demands, depicted in the following illustration, emerged from our »Self-defense Architecture« workshop, which we conducted outside the university, sitting at ground level, and exchanging our dreams and hopes for the future university (see fig. 1).

As the collaborative research project »Radical Pedagogies« (Colomina/Meister/Galán/Kotsioris 2022) asserts, the discipline of architecture can best be transformed by revolutionizing the way it is taught. In conclusion, our disruptive actions and demands address the university as a site of knowledge production that should start envisioning an inclusive, resilient, and equitable teaching and practice, or to use the words of Achille Mbembe: »In order to set our institutions firmly on the path of future knowledges, we need to reinvent a classroom without walls in which we are all co-learners; a university that is capable of convening various publics in new forms of assemblies that become points of convergence of and platforms for the redistribution of different kinds of knowledges« (Mbembe 2015: 7).

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3.

Demands for the university. © Chair of Unlearning.

1

AGAINST
OUR CULTURE
OF
SELF-
EXPLOITATION

BREAK ELITIST STRUCTURES!

We demand more criticism and consistent questioning of our own professional culture!

2

INTER
SECTIONALITY

KNOW YOUR
PRIVILEGE!

INTERSECTIONALITY

We call for critical questioning of the status quo through an intersectional lens.

3

NO TOLERANCE
FOR ANY KIND OF
DISCRIMINATION

CODE & ALLIANCES

We demand the establishment of a Code of Conduct!

4

ARCHITECTURE
DISCRIMINATES

do you wanna
know why?

CRITICAL AWARENESS MUST BE EMBEDDED IN THE CURRICULUM

We call for compulsory teaching content that deals with class, gender and race in relation to architecture.

WE ALL MAKE
MISTAKES... IT'S
PROFESSIONAL
TO ADMIT THEM

**ESTABLISH A CULTURE
OF ERROR**

**We demand a culture of solidarity
in the event of mistakes!**

EXCELLENCE
≠
accessible
&
affordable
for all

**MORE ACCESSIBILITY, LESS
EDUCATIONAL ELITE**

**We demand egalitarian access
to teaching!**

MORE
SPACE
for
BIPoC
WOMEN
LGBTQIA+

ROLE MODELS WANTED!

**We demand more visibility for
BIPoCs, women and queer people!**

WHO
POLICES
THE
PROFESSORS

**CONTROLLING THE TEACHING
FACULTY**

**We demand binding criticism and
reflection formats for the teaching
faculty!**

Where do you see the potential of working as a collective to intervene in political forces that shape architecture? What can we (un)learn from collective action?

We have learned that working as a collective means learning from the survival techniques of your fellow feminist parasites. Building up this network of Feminist killjoys (Ahmed 2023) can create assurance and solidarity when your standpoint is falsified and censored. Audre Lorde teaches us that survival is not an academic skill but relies on accepting our differences and making them strengths. (Lorde 2007: 99).

We have learned that softness surpasses hardness. When we enter spaces in the university, emotional, soft, and empathic interactions are often relegated to the background to remain professional.

But seeing your feminist role model opening a talk with tears in her eyes, giving her anger space, or leaving the stage after confronting an all-white³ male panel changed our perception of what professionalism means. Softness is connected with self-care and as Sara Ahmed writes, »Surviving as a feminist killjoy might be how we learn to take care of ourselves, given what we keep coming up against« (Ahmed 2023: 43).

Ultimately, we have unlearned to connect our personal value to appreciation by institutions and learned to avoid being subtly instrumentalized. Lorde's famous quote is: »The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change« (Lorde 2007: 99).

When the »master's house« is the university, we have to continuously unlearn the tools it has taught us, as they are founded on separative competition, hardness, and male-coded professionalism.

3 »Like ›blackness‹, whiteness does not refer to a biological characteristic or a specific skin color, but rather a political and social construction. Whiteness refers to the dominant and privileged position within the power relationship of racism, which otherwise usually remains unspoken and unnamed« (Amnesty International).

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