The Final Review is a Space and Time of Performance: Implications and Alternatives

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Introduction

Do we consider architectural education to be a practice of collaboration, or an independent project (Wingert-Playdon and Ng, 2015)? The answer to this question determines the methods and media through which we both teach and learn architecture. We contend that while the overall trend in architectural education is toward collaboration, the final review remains an individual performance spatially and temporally, asserting the authority of critics and limiting the flow of feedback. As the culminating event of design studios, the Final Review directly impacts the mediums in which projects are presented, the social hierarchies of those present at the review, the types of feedback given or received, and what students learn from the process. The questions we consider around the spatial and temporal practice of the final review emerged from research around feedback and studio culture in the authors' own school, the University of Waterloo School of Architecture (UWSA).

Purpose of the Final Review

Design reviews, critiques, or 'crits', in all their variations, represent key points of feedback in the design process, and are a fundamental part of design students' education. Of these, the most daunting for both beginning design students, and their more experienced peers is the final review. The standard final review structure, also known as a 'jury-style' review, has spatial and temporal characteristics commonly found in architecture schools across the world. Students stand in front of a wall full of pinned-up drawings, often accompanied by a model, facing a panel of, at minimum, three critics, who are in turn backed by a wider audience of students (Figure 1).

Figure 1 / Final reviews in multiple schools. Clockwise from top left: Undergraduate final review, 2014, UWSA / Photo by Wesley Chu
Final review of the Jim Vlock First Year Building Project, 2012, Yale School of Architecture / Photo by John Jacobson
Thesis studio final review, 2017, UWSA / Photo by Fred Hunsberger

Architecture studio reviews, Taubman / Photo courtesy of Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning

From the perspective of architectural educators, critiques are the central feedback and learning experience of the design studio (Anthony, 1987; Oh *et al.*, 2013). In a survey of the Faculty and Adjuncts at UWSA, when asked to describe what the term 'effective feedback' meant to them, virtually all respondents described that a positive crit, review or other experience of feedback was with the intention and/or perception of engaging in a productive discussion or dialogue. Such a discussion constitutes a multi-directional exchange of information that would allow students to reflect on and later improve their own work (Figure 2, left). Feedback, from desk crits to the final review, is intended to be a *collaborative* endeavor. Educators articulated the final review as a *process* rather than a product, with emphasis placed on improving design skills rather than presentation skills (Dai and Friesen, 2017).

This is a fairly accurate characterization of less formal modes of feedback in design studio such as the desk crit, peer discussions and group critiques. However, presentations that take the spatial form of the *final* review (often this would also include the mid-term review) are frequently perceived by students very differently. In contrast to a collaborative, design-focused process, students often view the final review as a painful, extraordinarily unproductive event; an interaction where the balance of power lies squarely with the panelists (Figure 2, right), and where students learn more about how to present and perform than how to design (Anthony, 1987, 1991; Estioko, Forrest and Amos, 2001; Corcoran, 2008; Dai and Friesen, 2017). Furthermore, students frequently describe jury-style reviews with violently negative language ('massacred', 'crucified'), and make comparisons to the dramatic, performative competitions of reality television such as Survivor or Big Brother (Anthony, 1987, 1991; Estioko, Forrest and Amos, 2001; Corcoran, 2008, p. 75).
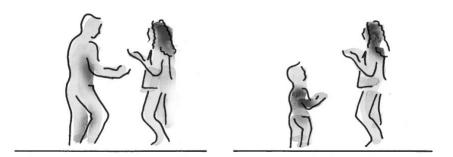

Figure 2 / Power relations in critiques: collaborative discussion among equals (left) vs. receiving judgment from the master critic (right) / Drawing by Allegra Friesen.

The discrepancy between students' and faculty's perceptions of the final review is striking, and has been reported both anecdotally and empirically (Argyris, 1981; Anthony, 1987; Koch *et al.*, 2002). Why then, are final reviews experienced in a way that seems completely at odds with their fundamental goal? There has been "virtually no empirical research" conducted into whether or not reviews and juries are a successful method of educating students (this is particularly concerning given that the lessons students are learning from jury-style reviews do not match educators' stated goals), no general theory of critiquing outlined, and no guideline established for how to give a good critique (Anthony, 1987; Estioko, Forrest and Amos, 2001; Oh *et al.*, 2013). This makes it difficult to know if we are critiquing well; if there is no agreed-upon 'best practice', we tend to follow the methods we've had experience with(Oh *et al.*, 2013). The result is that "the practice of critiquing has been passed down through a sort of unregulated osmosis" (Estioko, Forrest and Amos, 2001, pp. 2–3) and often reviewers simply use the techniques that were previously used on them (Anthony, 1987). Thus, in light of this lack of theory, we need to first understand the history of the final review in order to understand the dynamics of the final review today.

Origins of the Contemporary Final Review

The jury-style review was born with the nineteenth century establishment of the École des Beaux Arts (Anthony, 1987, 1991; Estioko, Forrest and Amos, 2001; Koch *et al.*, 2002; Corcoran, 2008). Students were divided among ateliers led by esteemed patrons or masters (Figure 3), design was taught by a practicing architect, and projects were evaluated by a jury (Anthony, 1987, 1991, 2012; Corcoran, 2008). The curriculum was in fact a series of design competitions, and, unlike the final review today, the entire jury evaluation took place without students present (Anthony, 1987, 1991, 2012). This created a competitive learning process based on "the analysis of precedent and the application of reason", but also maintained a master-apprentice dynamic much like that of the Medieval guilds the École replaced. This cemented the authority of the 'master' critic as the arbiter of truth and created a power dynamic that persists in the final review to this day (Fisher, 2000).

Figure 3 / Architecture Atelier Pascal / https://www.reseau-canope.fr/musee/collections/es/museum/mne/ecole-nationale-des-beaux-arts-architecture-atelier-paulin/17723faf-4e86-4858-9ab2-d0749d500ca7

The first schools of architecture formed in the United States were based on the École model, and most employed École-educated professors. The model still permeates many aspects of North American architectural education (Koch *et al.*, 2002). However, Bauhaus Modernism precipitated a revolution in architectural pedagogy, introducing a much broader curriculum and a 'learning by doing' philosophy (Figure 4). In North America, this was combined with philosopher and psychologist John Dewey's theory of learning as collaborative, with students actively participating in the practice of learning (Anthony, 2012). As a result, the 'desk-crit', a conversation between professor and student, gained its central role in design studio (Anthony, 2012). It is also during this period that the review evolved from a closed-door evaluation to today's public, performative critique.

Figure 4 / Josef Albers, teaching the Bauhaus Basic Course in Weimar, 1928 / http://www.design-is-fine.org/post/45019277892/josef-albers-teaching-the-bauhaus-basic-course-in

The post-Bauhaus vision of architectural education as a collaborative endeavor remains the goal of architectural education today. However, this is not how students experience the final review. Why is it that, as architectural pedagogy evolved to become more collaborative and interdisciplinary, the Beaux Arts master-student power relations held constant in the case of the final review? To begin to address this, we examine the final review itself, both spatially and temporally.

The Final Review: Performance in Space

Looking at the spatial structure of the final review diagrammatically (Figure 5), it can be broken down into four components: the student and their project, a gap, the critics, and the audience. It is worth noting here that within the space of the 'audience', engagement tends to decrease rapidly with increased distance. The inclusion of the student and their project in the same spatial category of this analysis is deliberate, highlighting the way the presenter and their work are pinned together in the direct gaze of critics and fellow students (Figure 6).
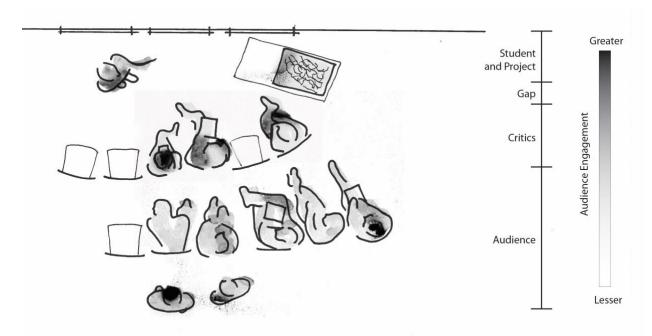
Figure 5 / Spatial components of the final review (plan) / Diagram by authors.

Figure 6 / Thesis final review / Photo by Michelle Bullough.

The social effects of this spatial arrangement become clear when we compare them to a set of spaces from popular culture. Recalling Corcoran's observation that students liken their architectural education to reality TV, we

compared the spatial layout of the Final Review with the extreme example of TV competitions such as the X-Factor or American Idol. We found them to be strikingly similar (Figure 7). Both the final review and the TV competition are composed of the same four spatial elements: a performer, set apart by a spatial gap (sometimes vertical, sometimes horizontal), a panel of judges, and an audience. Both judges and audience are confronting the individual performer, with the audience further reinforcing the social weight of the judges by physically backing them up.
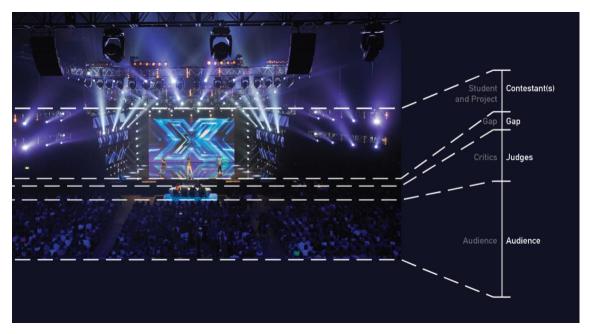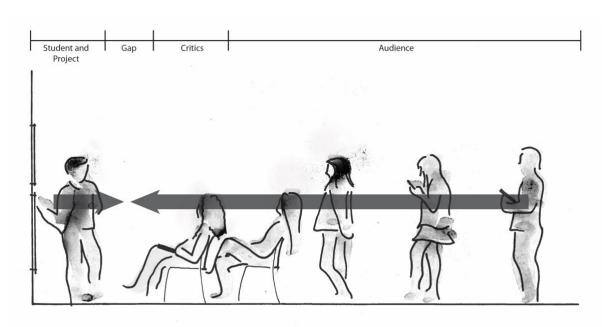

Figure 7 / Spatial components of the TV competition / Diagram modified by authors from https://www.a1lightingmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/x-factor.jpg.

Figure

8 / Spatial components of the final review (section) / Diagram by authors.

In section, the opposition between performer and judges is even clearer (Figure 8). The space of the final review is divided into two sides, confronting one another, and separated by a carefully maintained gap. This separation is rarely crossed, and then virtually always by one of the critics; not the presenter or audience. Thus, the spatial format of the final review implies a confrontational social hierarchy among those who participate in it. This reinforces the social power of the critic and emphasizes the flow of feedback in a single direction, from reviewer to student, encouraging the do-as-I-do, master to student instruction characteristic of the École des Beaux Arts rather than the collaborative design dialogue pioneered in the wake of the Bauhaus and employed in design studio classes during the rest of the term. This results in a "tendency… for students to uncritically accept the premises in a given curriculum, syllabus, or studio problem" (Brown and Godlewski, 2014).

However, the student is not the only review participant placed in a performative situation by this spatial layout. As seen in Figures 6, 7, and 8, the panel of judges is distinct from and located in front of the audience. This spatially indicates the critics' greater importance and social power, but also draws greater attention to their individual actions or comments. By placing reviewers in a secondary space of performance, the spatial layout encourages them to take a physical and intellectual distance from the project while discouraging them from voicing unconventional feedback. Thus, as the culminating event of the term and the only opportunity most students have to receive feedback on their completed projects, the Final Review tends to act as a normalizer, perpetuating architectural orthodoxy on the part of both students and reviewers, rather than fostering diversity and innovation.

The Final Review: Performance in Time

Just as the final review has a universal spatial format, it also has a common temporal format. One aspect of this is the timing of the final review in the semester, namely at the end, setting it apart from even the spatially similar mid-term review (Figure 9). At many schools, including UWSA, projects are not formally touched after the final review. As a result, students have a peculiar relationship with the review, where it is unclear how the final review correlates to the final grade. Frequently, from the students' perspective, the commentary of the final review is the only available explanation for the grades they receive, leading to the "misconception that the crit is going to be used for grading purposes" (Corcoran, 2008, p. 55). In fact, the final review is not a part of the final grading process; this often takes the form of a closed-door evaluation, much like the final juries of the École des Beaux Arts. Taking the students' perspective of this process, this is the only time they receive feedback on their completed project and therefore many fear this stand-alone performance is when the jury decides who makes it to the next round.
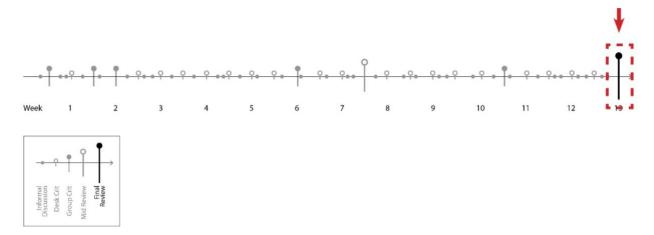

Figure 9 / Approximate semester feedback timeline / Diagram by authors.

A second aspect of the temporal format of the final review is the enforced compression of a semester of work into a performance of as little as 5 minutes (Figure 10). This isolates students temporally, setting them apart from their personal pasts and social present. Today's architecture students bring increasingly diverse histories, perspectives and epistemologies to their design work, yet the review as performance risks suppressing their initial intentions for the project. When only the minutes of performance matter, the processes, iterations, precedents of the preceding months, and the people (including instructors and classmates) whose conversations contributed to their ideas and designs, are abstracted and diminished. Similarly, this temporal compression influences the mediums in which work is presented, privileging a flashy, visually impactful graphic style over more subtle representations of design, and favouring a finished product over representations of exploration, process, and iteration.
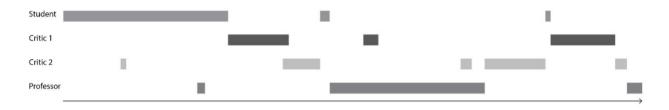

Figure 10 / Approximate final review timeline / Diagram by authors.

A common response to the concerns raised above is that this review format prepares students for professional practice by requiring them to develop clear, succinct, and convincing verbal and graphic communication (Anthony, 1987, 1991; Estioko, Forrest and Amos, 2001; Corcoran, 2008). For schools that, unlike UWSA, do not participate in cooperative education (where students receive simultaneous exposure to architectural academia and the world of professional practice), it is important that the design education itself fulfills this role. However, there is a conflict between this secondary framing of the final review as a rehearsal for presentations in professional practice and its primary goal of facilitating a design dialogue. We contend that these are two fundamentally opposite goals. A design dialogue is a multi-directional exchange of information, where people come together to critically reflect on a project with the aim of improving it. In contrast, a presentation in professional practice, such as a Request for Proposal (RFP), is a polished product aimed at convincing its audience that the presented idea is the best. Communicating design ideas clearly, succinctly, and convincingly is certainly a crucial skill to gain in architectural education, but is the final review the right time to practice it, particularly for beginning design students? As the last feedback opportunity of the term, and the *only* opportunity most students have to discuss their completed projects, do we want the final review to be a time of performance, practicing presentation skills, or do we want it to be an intense dialogue examining a semester of design work?

Some Questions

The difficult question in all of this is how do we align the reality of the final review with its intentions as a collaborative space and time? Right now, there is a divide between the ambition of the final review and how it unfolds, constructing a hierarchy in space and time between the student, the work and the jury that suppresses open and critical design dialogue at a key moment for feedback in the term. How do we push the high level of architectural representation and presentation that become so critical in the professional world while encouraging experimentation? Returning to the question posed at the beginning of the paper: "Fundamentally, do we consider architecture to be a collaborative practice or an individual pursuit" (Wingert-Playdon and Ng, 2015)? Do we want students to participate as self-reflective designers, open to unexpected solutions, or as individual performers vying to demonstrate their project is the best?

Can alternate formats help us ensure the final review is collaborative, co-creative experience? We already experience contrasting models of feedback through desk and group crits. Spatially, they minimize the power

imbalance, offering a more level footing for students in the engagement. Discussions typically focus more on the work, rather than being directed at the person. The desk crit offers a personal conversation over work where the student and professor address the problem together, sharing in speculation and critique (Figure 11). The group crit brings this conversation into a collective space, gathering together a variety of voices around a project (Figure 12). In both instances, the gap between the presenter and audience is eliminated as the only project occupies the spatial focal point.
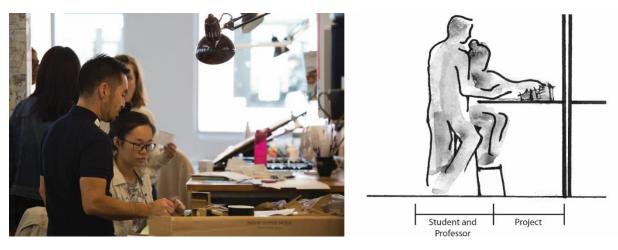

Figure 11 / Undergraduate desk crits, UWSA (left), and desk crit section (right) / Photo by Fred Hunsberger, diagram by authors.
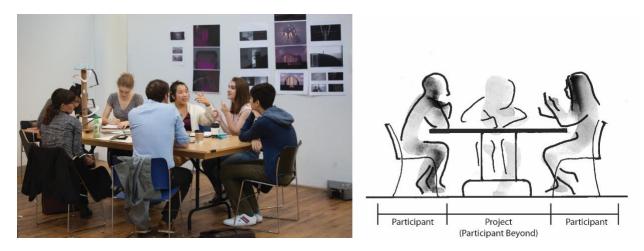

Figure 12 / Group crit, UWSA (left), and group crit section (right) / Photo by Fred Hunsberger, diagram by authors.

While the above examples are common events in most design studios, their great potential for critical discourse is discarded during the final review. Therefore, could final reviews operate as roundtables, with discussions over maquettes and experiments? This is a format already used by Hilary Sample for final reviews with her students at Columbia University (Sample, 2015). Roundtables shift the power dynamics of the student, the reviewers, and the work in the same way that desk and group crits invite discussion earlier in the term. They also open the greater possibilities for the expression of projects, bringing everyone closer to the material being discussed and supplementing the vertical pin-up with a central horizontal space. The work in the centre itself becomes a forum for discussion and speculation looking ahead.

Could we imagine final reviews as exhibitions of collective work and reflection, as Corcoran suggests in her 2008 thesis? Public collective exhibitions generate opportunities for feedback to occur among students, faculty,

reviewers, and the public. When the presentation of the work is clearly separated from the process of grading, students will be less invested in minimizing the flaws and challenges within their own work and more open to critical reflection.

Could the final review include individuals who are representative of the client or end-user being considered by the studio (Corcoran, 2008)? Presentations for perspectives outside of the architectural academy, including the general public, require radically different representation and description, and this format opens up often missing dialogues between the design studio and the real world This would make the final review a closer analogy to an RFP situation, introducing an aspect of feedback that will be crucial throughout the professional career of designers.

Could final reviews occur as a reflection on an entire term's work between individual students and one or two of their professors? This is the model one of the authors experienced while on exchange at the University of Sheffield in the UK. The final product at the end of the term is contextualized and evaluated against the ambitions and experimentation of students through the entire term, valuing design method and process in parallel with the final product. Design education is, after all, not a product, but an extended process of building knowledge and skills.

In summary, the way final reviews as officially described suggests collaboration, while in practice their typical spatial and temporal format reinforces individuality. Architecture schools already enable a variety of practices that support diverse social relations in the design process. Therefore, can we leverage these to reconceptualise the final review as a space and time in which students and professors engage in productive, co-creative discourses on architecture, building a discipline that focuses on producing more ethical, empathetic, collaborative, and socially responsible design projects?

Acknowledgements

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