

# Obituary: Thomas A. Dutton – Not a Departure but a Legacy of Dialogic Learning in Architecture.

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**ABSTRACT** At the end of September 2017, through an electronic circular from the Association of Architectural Educators, I came to know a few months late that Professor Thomas A. Dutton has passed away in June 2017. Died at an age of 65 years, with his departure as an influential educator, architect, and community enabler, a great void and a vacuum in architectural education as an academic discipline is created. A Cincinnati Professor of Community Engagement at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, Tom left a legacy of body of writings, approaches to learning, fervent commitment, and, most important, countless professionals who, under his teachings, have acquired critical abilities to become agents of transformations of the communities they serve towards spatial justice and social impartiality. It is with great sadness that I write this Obituary for Tom Dutton. I reflect on my interaction with him in two occasions and present analytical contemplation on the design studio ideals he established.

My first interaction with Professor Dutton took place when I was conducting my research during the period between 1992 and 1995 at the College of Design, North Carolina State University, as part of my PhD investigation under Professor Henry Sanoff's supervision. An integral part of my research was to establish a series of models of alternative studio teaching/learning approaches that

revolutionize the essence of the architectural design studio as a learning platform with the aim of reshaping studio pedagogy and the role of design educators. My readings of three important texts by Tom resulted in establishing an alternative design studio teaching model unique to his approach.<sup>1 2</sup> Part of the process was to contact the author(s) that influenced the shaping of the models. I had several

interactions with Tom over the phone and by fax that resulted in revising his teaching model, which was later published in some of my key publications.<sup>3 4 5</sup>

With the availability of the internet for personal office and home use since mid-1995s, my interaction with Tom was occasional but was maintained throughout the years until the period between mid-2005 and mid-2006 when I was guest editing a special issue of *Open House International Journal* on ‘*design studio teaching practices: between traditional, revolutionary, and virtual models.*’ In this effort, I received a substantial number of potential articles that cited his approach and referenced his writings.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I decided to invite him as one of the important external reviewers for this special issue which included Henry Sanoff, Julia Robinson; Michael Crosbie; and Ruth Morrow. In his own words he stated in one of the email communications in 31 October 2005: “*I appreciate identifying me as one of the reviewers, ... count me in.*” In these interactions Tom was so kind, helpful, and supportive and his comments helped authors advance their work and address any missing or ambiguous points in explaining their studio experiences as educators.

As one of a few distinguished community design and engagement educators Tom’s work promoted the notion of ‘*deschooling,*’ or what is called now ‘*schools without walls,*’ a concept initially introduced to the world academic community by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. A harsh critic of most traditional educational practices, Freire strongly argued that the contemporary educational system is primarily an oppressive one that emphasises class discrimination rather than social integration.<sup>7</sup> Instead, he calls for promoting ‘*critical consciousness,*’ in learners; a view that aims at changing oppressive traditional schooling systems by encouraging the active exploration of abstract concepts and personal interactive experiences through dialogue. The work of Dutton is a great reflection of Freire’s concepts and, in essence, responds to Gregory Baum’s (1977) perceptive argument:

*True dialogue takes place only among equals. There is no dialogue across the boundaries between master and servants, for the master will listen only as long as his power remains intact, and the servant will limit his communication to which he cannot*

*be punished. In fact, to recommend a dialogue in a situation of inequality is a deceptive ideology of the powerful who wishes to persuade the powerless that harmony and understanding are possible in society without any change in the status of power.<sup>8</sup>*

Following this eloquent statement, the work of Dutton represents a departure from the traditional roles of the architect as advisors and designers to that of enablers and facilitators. It helps establish a more egalitarian, effective and utilitarian dialogue between the community, the educator and the learner. In becoming facilitators of learning, educators, in fact, reduce their supremacy and power; instead they become more coactive as they foster, promote, instil and enhance the skills and powers of critical thinking, objective judgement, and social awareness of their learners. Unlike the more hierarchical relationships that characterise traditional design studio pedagogy, the design teaching/learning approach of Dutton emphasises dialogue and equality, without compromising design quality.

It appears that the overall climate of learning in the 1970s and the early 1980s was a prelude to what Dutton has generated in one of his early writings as studio teaching/learning approach, where political knowledge within the architectural design studio was debated,<sup>9 10</sup> where alternative architect role models were introduced,<sup>11</sup> and where collaboration, community participation and engaging with small communities in rural America was perceived as panacea to some of the ills that characterise design teaching practices.<sup>12 13 14</sup> Indeed, that was a rich period in thought, writing, and experimentation.

Tom’s work was also influenced by the ‘*clinic*’ notion where schools and studios acted as community development centres (CDCs). These clinics were sometimes sponsored by or located within a school of architecture, or affiliated as a separate, but related, entity or outreach programme with the involvement of the school’s faculty and students. Such clinics provided students with hands-on opportunities to work in real life projects, with real clients, and often with local architects.<sup>15</sup> The theoretical underpinnings in pedagogy on which the work of Dutton is based is the early works of Henri Giroux; a prominent

pedagogue and cultural theorist, who worked with Tom at the same University.<sup>16 17</sup> His ideas about the role of ideology, culture, and resistance in education, and the process of schooling, paved the road for Tom to incorporate the ‘*hidden curriculum*’ concept into design studio pedagogy.

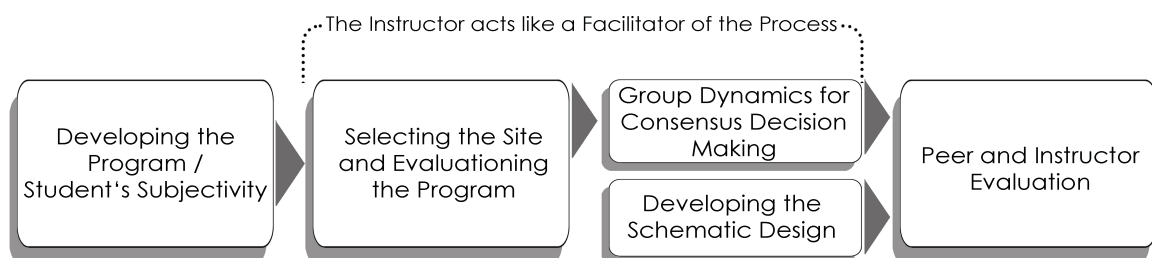
Developed by Thomas Dutton, the ‘hidden’ curriculum model was developed in 1987 at Miami University, Ohio. This model promotes design as a process of acquiring knowledge under certain conditions and is based on the notion that architecture, like any commodity, is produced and distributed according to particular voices situated in relations of power. In this sense, architectural design is a controlled activity that is not free or freed from the political and economic trends that characterise the context within which it is developed. Thus, since architecture is intimately related to societal relations of power, it is important to determine what effect such relationships have on the education and learning of future architects.<sup>18</sup> The ‘hidden’ curriculum model views design as an activity in which designers/students are engaged intellectually and socially, shifting between analytic, synthetic and evaluative modes of thinking in different sets of activities or phases.

The ‘hidden’ curriculum concept refers to an appreciation of those unstated values, attitudes and norms that stem tacitly from the social relation of the learning setting and the content of work. Thus, this model acknowledges three basic facts: a) design studios are not neutral sites, b) design studios are integral parts of the social, political, economic and cultural relations of the society, and c) this set of

relations plays a significant role in the selection, organisation and distribution of knowledge in the design studio, as well as the formation of the studio social relations and practices.

Situated in a broader context, the design studio as a producer of knowledge and as a harbinger of social practice usually has intimate connections to wider production, distribution and legitimating practices of society; these are often manipulated by governing social, economic and political institutions. Hence, the hidden curriculum model is designed to expose the quid pro quo nature of some architectural practice in which there is a hidden agenda that perpetuates the existing social structure and hampers free knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

The learning process of the ‘hidden’ curriculum model involves several stages. Initially the work starts with exploring the students’ subjectivity, with the meanings they hold, and the interpretations they have about urban life; students are individually responsible for developing their own programs or briefs, determining the social context of a project, and selecting the site from a pre-selected set. The second stage is more collaborative and exposes students to a system of consensus decision-making, which leads to a more balanced division of power amongst themselves. During this stage, the instructor helps establish group dynamics, and endeavours to shift the locus of responsibility from a typical instructor/student relationship to one focused on the students. Here, the instructor acts as a facilitator; his/her reduced role and power enables a better and more candid dialogue between the student and the instructor. The final stage of the process is the



The process begins with developing the program according to the students' subjectivity. Group dynamics are established to reach consensus in decision making. The next steps lead to the development of the design solutions, and then evaluating the proposals by the peers and the instructor.

Figure 1: The process of Tom Dutton’s hidden curriculum studio teaching model (Salama, 2015).

<b>Design Process</b>	<b>Teaching/Learning Style</b>
Considers programming phase as a crucial part of the studio.	Emphasizes that knowledge should be incorporated into particular situations.
Emphasizes social, political, and cultural relationships within society.	Considers motivating the student as a major part of the process.
Inspires group discussions for identifying design intentions.	Focuses on groups and individual work.
Incites reaching consensus in decision-making.	Underscores the students' critical abilities.
Encourages interaction with clients/users while defining design constraints.	Utilizes a holistic approach to learning.
Focuses on transforming behavioural information in architectural form.	Incorporates self and peer evaluation.
	Permits learning about the process of change in dynamic environment.

*Table 1: Key characteristics of Tom Dutton's hidden curriculum studio teaching model*

evaluation stage, which is not only transparent and explicit but also student-driven as students also have a say in their individual assessment and that of studio mates. (Figure 1)

In applying the concept of 'hidden' curriculum as an integral part of the teaching/learning process, instructors reinterpret the relationship between knowledge and power, since they are involved in how studio knowledge always reinforces certain ideologies, values, and assumptions about social reality in order to sustain the interests of certain groups/organisations at the expense of others. Therefore, the modes of thinking in this model include analytic, synthetic, and evaluative, to engage students intellectually and socially; by encouraging democratic expression with the instructor as facilitator rather than leader or master; the studio is democratised, and the power of the studio members (both students and instructors) is redistributed equally. This facilitates equal and collaborative deliberations in all areas of the studio life including the conditions of work, programmatic considerations, the scope of readings, and even the studio scheduling.

Dutton's hidden curriculum model revitalises and redevelops studio conditions whereby students are encouraged to take on the primary responsibility to critique one another and to learn what it means to critique and how a critique might be performed and used

effectively. Through this process, deeper levels of positive learning take place as students experience opportunities to facilitate the investigation of the issues, which they deem important. Additionally students learn how to negotiate and how to appropriately deal with those who disagree with their values; by necessity, they develop the mechanisms, both verbal and graphic, to expose, explore, and negotiate differences of opinions.

The learning environment is thus promoted as a non-competitive and non-intimidating one. Traditionally, however, competition is viewed as a major motivator in the studio; it helps keep alive the myth that design is a self-indulgent activity. According to Dutton competition promotes the belief that ideas are unique, to be individually nurtured, closely guarded, and heavily protected against stealing. Based on theories of action and organisational learning,<sup>20</sup> the hidden curriculum model resists and rejects competitive learning practices and instead focuses on collaborative and peer learning by encouraging students to utilise each other as resources, group work provides a supportive environment that helps engender discourse, creativity and innovation. In brief, the antithesis of the instructor-centred studio, the hidden curriculum model provides a student-centred, not an instructor-centred experience and setting. Accordingly instructors and students should begin to question the

assumptions and values underlying the theories and practices of more traditional instructor-controlled design studios (Table 1).

Tom enjoyed unique personal qualities and academic abilities that blended teaching and scholarship, creativity and social responsibility, power and dialogue towards instilling values and practices of spatial justice and social impartiality within the educational system of architecture. Empowering his students to become engaged citizens the passing away of Professor Thomas A. Dutton is not a departure but a legacy of dialogic learning in architecture.

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