'Transformative Pedagogy in Architecture and Urbanism' authored by Dr. Ashraf M. Salama is published by Umbau-Verlag in 2009. This is a new updated version of ‘New Trends in Architectural Education: Designing the Design Studio’ by the same author and published in 1995 by Tailored Text Publishers and Unlimited Potential Publishing, Raleigh, NC., with the incorporation of concepts, concerns and practices that Dr. Salama has researched, wrote and introduced in the past 15 years.

Dr. Salama’s thoughtful writings and research for the past two decades have argued for more effective means of teaching architectural design. In his words, ‘the design studio is the kiln where the future architects are molded’. Across the world the studio is the backbone of architectural design education. And it is here that transformation needs to set in. The book calls for expansion of knowledge base in architectural design studio.

In the scramble to ‘progress’, societies across the world, especially in the developing worlds, continue to bear the brunt of facelessness and incongruousness of the ‘built’ in their environs.
As fallout of globalization, a shrinking world is yet to come to terms with the rapid transformations that are in its wake threatening to rent apart the delicate weave of the socio-economic fabric and the ethos of the people coupled with a total disregard to local climate, materials and resources.

Build to impress and sell is a contemporary strategy gripping the architectural profession. As a natural response, "Architectural education is dominated by subjective, elitist, ideological and master apprentice models that aggrandize invention over innovation and radical individualism over collaborative processes" states Prof. Nikos Salingaros in the preface to this book. The result is that most of what the architect does is invisible since it occurs in a ‘private sanctuary’ rather than a public domain as Prof. Henry Sanoff pens in the forward to the book. Needless to say, the congruency between education of architects, their role in the society and its justification lies in the commitment and ability to provide better environments for contemporary societies; therein also lies the sustainability of the profession.

It is a dire need of our age to transform the education of architects so that their contributions are responsive, sensitive and humane. This is especially true since contemporary societies are in a continuous process of transformation and their learning system should respond to these changes in order to be proactive and relevant. It is imperative to adopt an inclusive, participatory and democratic approach as a panacea to the present situation. This position draws affirmatively from the community participation methods in design and planning proposed by Prof. Henry Sanoff. This shall reinforce the weak link between the society and its involvement in its own architecture.

In his introduction, Dr. Salama very succinctly portrays this ground situation. Penned with a natural flow, the sequential build up for the necessity of such an intervention helps put the pertinence of this publication into focus. Presented in five chapters, the first three put forth a new theory for transformative pedagogy in architecture and urbanism, contextualizing through a discussion on the multiple roles of an architect in society and analyzing conventional pedagogies inherited from the past. Taking support of worldwide and regional surveys, the consequences of the traditional pedagogies are discussed threadbare.

For the reader thus far, the most natural question is ‘What next?’ The last two chapters address exactly that. They manifest in them the positive signs found in the constructive reactions to the conventional design pedagogy. Herein are demonstrated models, tools and techniques that empower the incorporation of transformative pedagogy along with its integral mechanisms.

The introduction to each chapter bears in it a concise description of the chapter, acquainting the reader in a nut shell to the structure and content of the chapter to follow. I appreciated this thoughtful inclusion, although at points I felt it to be repetitive, for it puts one in a comfortable position with the overall framework of the book and helps build a comfort level with respect to each oncoming chapter.

Chapter 1 titled, ‘A New theory for Transformative pedagogy in Architecture and Urbanism’, is spaced into five sub-divisions. The author mandates a comprehensive understanding of the role of knowledge in creating meaningful environments and goes on to a systematic identification of emerging issues of our
contemporary age. The theory proposed bases itself on the changing contexts and surrounding circumstances to enable architects to create livable environments.

This chapter contains an interesting comparison between virtues of systemic pedagogy over the pitfalls of the present mechanistic pedagogy and enlists knowledge content areas, which have emerged as a reaction to paradigm shifts in investigating, understanding and designing built environments.

Chapter 2 titled, ‘The Architect, The Profession and The Society’, initiates with a recall of the profession in times historical, when architects were patronized only by the top echelons of society and the method of design solution was intuitive and relied heavily on experience, judgment and individual talent of the architect. Great individual works of art were created by this process. But gone are those days when ‘form development’ and ‘art alone is architecture’ was the principal concern of the profession.

Post industrial revolution came the transformation of the social order; and the focus now is on service to a new clientele: the citizens. Emergence of complex activities, technologies and services that were not previously identified, as specific skills of the architect are now an integral part of professional services. Since the scope of services has widened so, there is also rising competition from other arenas such as the engineers, interior designers, landscape architects and non-design professionals with competency in building process. The spate of specializations that the 20th century brought about is responsible for the creation of specialty firms for designing specific typologies and facilities.

The field of architecture has graduated from just being an art to being a science and an industry. The art-based emphasis of traditional pedagogy makes an incomplete architect, unable to render services that are expected of him. I quote Dr. Salama’s very pertinent observation, ‘….this sense of artistic entitlement empowers a few to design a few brilliant individual buildings. Yet, it has produced fragmented and illegible urbanism’.

Chapter 3, ‘The Conventional Approach to Studio Teaching Practice’, is structured in 7 sections. The main concern discussed here is to trace the roots of the traditional or conventional approach to design education. Rightly so, it analyses the various points of view in architectural education: academic, craft, technological and sociological. The evolution of the two major schools of educational systems: the Beaux-arts and the Bauhaus are discussed at length. Although their approaches seem different, their emphasis was on the formal aspects of architecture and fundamentals of form and its dynamics, but both showed little concern for socio-cultural issues! Design teaching in contemporary times is reminiscent of these two traditional approaches.

In a sequential manner the author critically examines the pitfalls of design studio with supporting references from a number of researchers. If you have been involved in the studio as an instructor, the identification with issues in the book is almost total, pointing to the universality of the phenomena. A world wide survey of architectural teaching practices conducted by the author in the past decade makes for this observation, ‘……there is a need to bridge the gap between what is introduced
in the design studio and what the society needs, expects and deserves’.

This chapter goes to great extend to highlight the missing knowledge components in architectural education and design teaching practices. The critical discussion in this chapter points to the fact that understanding of design has expanded from a view of design as an intuitive experience with an aesthetical end product to a view of design as a process of investigating, reasoning and testing.

Chapter 4, ‘Against the Conventional Studio Pedagogy’, is structured in three sections. The first presents a systematic critical analysis of ten revolutionary models in which the instructors have attempted to expand the role of the architect to be more responsive to environmental needs of contemporary societies. Some methods have been developed as a reaction to the conventional approach and its consequences. But the baseline in each is the incorporation of knowledge with its application in particular design situations. Each model is crisply described with its underlying concept, the design process and the way in which it is taught. A flow chart summarizes the process in a nutshell at the end.

In the second section, building on the acquaintance the reader now has to the models, Dr. Salama presents a preliminary reflective comparison to clarify the basic characteristics, features and the theories underpinning the models and points pertinently that these have at their base the search for more humane architecture, while bridging the gap between profession and education by introduction of more realistic issues in design. And each model stresses on one or two aspects of architecture such as social, political, formal, functional, economical or ecological as integral parts of design.

In the third section, Dr. Salama proposes his ‘Process Oriented Studio Pedagogy’. He emphasizes the essential aspects of studio teaching as ‘what to design and how to design’. Implemented by him in different settings and levels since 1995, the highlight of this studio process is its effort to fully utilize the student’s capacity by drawing upon both: inferential logic (a function of the left side of the brain) as well as intuition and imagination (a function of its right side). The implementation of this process by Dr. Salama, in his studio is explained through two student projects.

Chapter 5, ‘Empowering Transformative Pedagogy: A Knowledge-Based Architectural and Urban Design Studio’ is a fit finale to this book. I personally appreciated this chapter the most. Naturally so, for after a consistent buildup of concepts, theories, the many supporting arguments, one is ready for ‘leaping to action’. And that is what this concluding chapter does in full measure.

Dr. Salama highlights three concepts that empower transformative pedagogy: architectural and urban programming, post-occupancy evaluation and user participation. Together these encompass a wide spectrum of techniques that are student centered, process oriented and knowledge based. These make the much-needed link between the artistic paradigm and the social paradigm, paving way for a new evidence based culture in design studio teaching practices. These techniques help build a knowledge base which has a capacity to empower students with more control over their design actions and decisions while still learning.

This chapter sectioned into four, starts with a
A summary of issues dealt with in past chapters. Constituents for a Transformative Pedagogy are identified and some such as: knowledge, creativity and critical inquiry are dealt upon in detail. To channelize a liberal understanding of these, the chapter is woven through requisite theories and relevant quotes.

Dr. Salama puts forth some generic scenarios and details out the mechanism for achieving them. He strongly emphasizes environmental evaluation as a strategy for acquiring knowledge, programming for nurturing serialist and holistic modes of thinking of a design problem and participatory design to go beyond available literature and foster in the student sensitivity to listen to users and filter relevant information necessary for designing. The incorporation of each of these strategies in the studio is discussed further.

The systematic build up to Transformative Pedagogy most appreciably ends where it rightly should: in the studio. The last sub section is devoted to outlining the different hands on techniques that can help integrate three basic components of design, ‘what, how and why’ and get closer to an evidence based design. These are aimed at expanding the knowledge base in the design studio by various explorations.

I wish to particularly put on record the ability of this book to establish a rapport with the reader especially if he/she is from related fields, and very specially from academics, for it targets issues that are universal, issues that are our primary concern, issues that need urgent attention so that with particular reference to the ‘wonder and wish list’ of the author, we are able to stem the insane uncontrolled spoiling of the built environs even after ‘being educated’, expand our ambit to serving a wider section of the society, nurture in us the ability to protect our heritage, democratize our design practices and at a more humane level, be able to innovate and bring about a positive change even in the lives of the poor and the under privileged.

As in the words of Dr. Salama, ‘.....return architecture to its former position of being an expression of society; and arising from within it....’

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