Understanding the Process of Aesthetic Education in Design Studios: Toward a New Framework for the Pedagogy of Aesthetics

JI YOUNG CHO
Kent State University

NARRATIVE

INTRODUCTION
This paper aims to identify the process of aesthetic education in design studios. Design studio is a significant place, where students of interior design and architecture learn the multifaceted nature of design (Bhatia, 2006; Findeli, 2001). Students’ design solutions actually occur in studio, and the essence of the studio is the discussions regarding the various aspects of their solutions. One of those design aspects is aesthetics.

However, there has been little research explaining the process of aesthetic education, including how students and instructors go through such a process, in both the interior design and architecture academies, even though aesthetics is one of the critical issues in the field (Johnson, 1997). Given that pursuing beauty is one of the roles of designers and architects, the discussion of beauty cannot be excluded from education.

BACKGROUND
Aesthetics is one of the frequently used terms in the discussion of beauty in art or architecture, but at the same time it is loosely defined and its meaning is often debated. The term aesthetics means “to perceive” (Wartenberg, p. 6); it was around 1750 when the philosopher Alexander Baumgarten redefined it to mean the study of good and bad perceptions. However, it was through Kant’s influential work Critique of Judgment that the term aesthetics came to occupy the dominant position in modern aesthetics (Townsend, 2001, p. 118).

In architecture, aesthetics is considered according to Vitruvius’ definition as one of the qualities of architecture. Vitruvius defined good architecture as fulfilling three aspects: venustas (beauty), firmitas (firmness), and utilitas (utility) (Vitruvius, 15 B.C./1999). Venustas is a Latin term that implies “a visual quality in architecture that would arouse the emotion of love” (Britannica Online Encyclopedia, 2008). In the 17th century, Sir Henry Wotton paraphrased Vitruvius’ venustas as “delight.”

It is assumed that aesthetics may not be discussed using the term itself. In the architecture field, the term aesthetics is not frequently used; instead, different terms such as balance, fitness, or affordance (Gibson, 1979) are used to imply the aesthetic quality of architecture. Thus, for this research, I proposed a working definition of aesthetics in architecture as follows: “Aesthetics is a quality of architecture—either exterior or interior—regarding conceptual, formal, and symbolic aspects that give pleasure to people from the design process to the design product.”

PURPOSE
This study explored the process of aesthetic education in design studios by using a grounded theory approach. This approach refers to “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 23). The purposes of this study are (a) to understand the two primary groups’ (students’ and instructors’) perspectives of current aesthetic education; (b) to identify the process of aesthetic education; and (c) to provide a new framework for the pedagogy of aesthetics that can enhance educators’ and students’ understanding of the process.

METHOD
Three design studios—one interior design studio and two architecture design studios in the Midwest—were observed once a week for a whole academic semester. The reason for the regularity and duration is that...
research conducted over a long period of time, involving ongoing observations and interviews, is necessary to understand the phenomenon of aesthetic education. The three instructors and their 40 students were interviewed. Through the grounded approach, a theoretical framework for the process of aesthetic education was proposed.

**FINDINGS**

Need for More Discussion of Aesthetics

Regarding courses related to aesthetics, most instructors and students responded that design studio is their primary place of study, followed by history and design principle/visual design courses. However, they believed that any class (history, structure, material) can be the venue for learning about aesthetics depending on how the instructor teaches/approaches the course. All instructors agreed there was a lack of aesthetic discussion in studios and the overall curriculum. They believe there needs to more discussions about aesthetics in architecture/interior design education.

Aesthetics of Architecture as Visual Object Versus Experience

There was a conflict regarding whether aesthetics of architecture means to view architecture as a visual object or as a spatial experience. Whereas most instructors emphasized spatial experience, students had a tendency to consider unique exteriors and landmarks as the aesthetics of a building.

In all three studios, instructors and students did not use the term *aesthetics* heavily. Rather, they used different terms when expressing the nature of aesthetics, such as appearance/looks, beauty, emotion/impression, form/shape, goodness, organizing principle, pleasing, preference, proportion, and vocabulary/language.

Classical Aesthetics Versus Expressive Aesthetics

Students and instructors used the following phrases instead of directly using the term *aesthetics* when they expressed relevant properties: breaking symmetry, consistency/coherence, contrast, fit (affordance), focal point, meaningful, not literal, poetic, standout, holistic, and uniqueness. Most of these expressions can be divided into two main categories: (a) something that fits well and harmonizes with its context, and (b) something that is unique and a standout. These two categories correspond to the “preference-for-prototype model” and the “preference-for-difference model.” The preference-for-prototype theory (Whitfield & Slatter, 1979) explains that people prefer “the typical examples of a category, the ones that are often also very familiar and we have been exposed to repeatedly” (as cited in Hekkert, 2006, p. 167). The preference-for-difference theory explains people tend to prefer something new, unique, and unfamiliar (Martindale, 1990).

Lavie and Tractinsky (2004) suggested two aesthetic dimensions of visual perceptions: classical aesthetics and expressive aesthetics. Classical aesthetics include aspects that have been common from antiquity to the 18th century, such as order and clear design, and expressive aesthetics include designer’s creativity, originality, and an ability to break down conventions (p. 269). Based on this definition, preference-for-prototype seems to correspond to classical aesthetics, and the preference-for-difference model seems to agree with expressive aesthetics.

Regarding preferred building type, students tended to like unique and standout buildings rather than works of their instructors’ hero architects like Louis Kahn. Students preferred unique/conic buildings such as Frank Gehry’s Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles or the Sydney Opera House more than the timeless/essential architecture of Louis Kahn’s Kimbell Art Museum that instructors described.

Clash of Aesthetics Between Instructor and Students

There was a conflict of aesthetics between instructors and students. According to their statements, students tended to be sensitive when their sense of aesthetics was discussed or considered in a negative light. Some students complained about their studio’s prescriptive environment, where they felt their instructor imposed his or her aesthetics and gave similar comments to most of the students.

Also, there was a tendency for the more experienced students in design studios to have greater aesthetic conflict with the instructor. For example, a student who has a strong preference for certain aesthetics would have a conflict with the instructor when their preferences dif-
When the instructor emphasized his or her aesthetics too strongly and imposed it on students, and a student’s aesthetic preference was different from that of the teacher, that student did not feel a strong attachment to his or her project. In contrast, students had a strong attachment to a project when the student and instructor held similar aesthetic preferences. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the degree to which an instructor emphasizes his or her aesthetics and students’ attachment to their projects.

**DISCUSSION**

**Process of Aesthetics**

The conflict between instructor and students regarding aesthetics can be understood as the gap of aesthetics between laypersons and professionals. Difference in aesthetic preference between architects/designers and laypersons has been studied in architecture, landscape architecture, and urban studies (Devlin & Nasar, 1989; Gifford et al., 2002). Such studies showed that architect/designer and layperson groups’ understanding of “high” and “popular” attributes is different.

The findings from this study indicate that education in studio can be understood as a process by which laypersons acculturate (or come to belong) to the professional community as designers or architects. Students understood aesthetics in the studios to be a process of acquiring visual sense, of opening their eyes to that which was not previously considered beautiful, and of acculturating to the community of designers/architects.

There are several implications for educators from this study. First, interior design/architectural design education is a process not only of learning obvious knowledge such as technology or structure, but also a process of learning to discern beauty and realize its diversity, for students to see beauty where they did not see beauty before.

Second, educators need to know that the process of aesthetic education in architectural design is the way in
which a layperson comes to belong to the professional community.

Third, educators also need to know the possibility of a clash of aesthetics between instructors and students, especially for advanced-level students. Thus, rather than seeking to impose one’s aesthetics, suggesting precedence with an explanation of principle and rationale preserves students’ right to find and develop their own aesthetics.

REFERENCES (APA)


