Academic Capitalism in Architecture Schools: A feminist critique of employability, 24/7 work and entrepreneurship

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ARCHITECTURE AND FEMINISMS

Set against the background of a ‘general crisis’ that is environmental, political and social, this book examines a series of specific intersections between architecture and feminisms, understood in the plural. The collected essays and projects that make up the book follow transversal trajectories that crisscross between ecologies, economies and technologies, exploring specific cases and positions in relation to the themes of the archive, control, work and milieu. This collective intellectual labour can be located amidst a worldwide depletion of material resources, a hollowing out of political power and the degradation of constructed and natural environments. Feminist positions suggest ways of ethically coping with a world that is becoming increasingly unstable and contested. The many voices gathered here are united by the task of putting critical concepts and feminist design tools to use in order to offer experimental approaches to the creation of a more habitable world. Drawing inspiration from the active archives of feminist precursors, existing and re-imagined, and by way of a re-engagement in the histories, theories and projected futures of critical feminist projects, the book presents a collection of twenty-three essays and eight projects, with the aim of taking stock of our current condition and re-engaging in our precarious environment-worlds.

Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson and Helen Runting are all teachers and researchers at the School of Architecture, KTH (Royal Institute of Architecture), Stockholm, Sweden. They share a concern with the socio-political and environmental crises that are challenging the world, and with the question of how architecture, as practice, theory, and discipline, stimulates and counteracts the destructive tendencies of contemporary capitalism and patriarchy.
Set against the background of a ‘general crisis’ that is environmental, political and social, this book examines a series of specific intersections between architecture and feminisms, understood in the plural. The collected essays and projects which make up the book follow transversal trajectories that criss-cross between ecologies, economies and technologies, exploring specific cases and positions in relation to the themes of the archive, control, work and milieu. This collective intellectual labour can be located amidst a worldwide depletion of material resources, a hollowing out of political power and the degradation of constructed and natural environments. Feminist positions suggest ways of ethically coping with a world that is becoming increasingly unstable and contested. The many voices gathered here are united by the task of putting critical concepts and feminist design tools to use in order to offer experimental approaches to the creation of a more habitable world. Drawing inspiration from the active archives of feminist precursors, existing and re-imagined, and by way of a re-engagement in the histories, theories and projected futures of critical feminist projects, the book presents a collection of twenty-three essays and eight projects, with the aim of taking stock of our current condition and re-engaging in our precarious environment-worlds.

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Chapter 13

Academic capitalism in architecture schools

A feminist critique of employability, 24/7 work and entrepreneurship

Igea Troiani

Figure 13.1 Charlie Chaplin, Stanley Sanford, from Modern Times, 1936
Copyright Photographer Chaplin/United Artists/REX/Shutterstock
In the 1936 comedy film, *Modern Times,* Chaplin is employed on an assembly line where he screws nuts onto pieces of machinery in a steel factory at an ever-increasing rate. As the machine is sped up on the instruction of the President of the Electro Steel Corporation, Chaplin is forced to work faster. In an ingenious move by upper management to maximise production, a piece of new technology, the “feeding machine” is brought onto the shop floor and the workers are force fed in a way that ensures their hands are free to work for greater productivity. Unable to keep up Chaplin goes mad and runs into the machine that continues regardless.

If this [the university] is a firm, . . . and if President Kerr in fact is the manager; then I’ll tell you something. The faculty are a bunch of employees; and we’re the raw material! But we’re a bunch of raw materials that don’t mean to be . . . Don’t mean to be made into any product . . . Don’t mean to end up being bought by some clients of the University, be they the government, be they industry, . . . be they anyone! We’re human beings!
There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part! . . . And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels . . . upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop! And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, . . . that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!²

Academic capitalism

Universities have long been free institutions. In the United Kingdom, they are becoming less so, in both their demand for (ever-increasing) student fees and their positioning in relation to the marketplace outside the university. Marketisation (or increased market and market-like behaviour) has allowed many public universities worldwide to transition from Foucault's 'premodern or medieval university'³ to entrepreneurial businesses. During the Industrial Revolution, academics were able to 'position themselves between capital and labor, protecting themselves from the harsh discipline of the market'.⁴ But the nature of academic labour changed dramatically during the late 20th century due to the 'globalization of the political economy'⁵ resulting in academic capitalism.⁶ Since then, 'changes in funding [have] work[ed] to bring the university and its faculty in line with economic production and the managerial revolution'.⁷ The implementation of a New Public Management (NPM) approach means that governments require public universities to fund and manage their own budgets, transacting according to a neoliberal system of consuming and producing students, staff, knowledge and research for the purpose of improving national economies through continuous growth from the engine of entrepreneurial innovation.

While this is a universal phenomenon experienced across all disciplines, here I focus in detail on the negative impact academic capitalism has had on schools of architecture in the UK. While many academics will identify with what is discussed, it can be uncomfortable and depressing for some to acknowledge because it sheds doubts about the future of architectural education. My argument is that architectural academics are too acquiescent and polite to react against the neoliberal demands imparted on us. Denialism will do little to improve an unhealthy model of architectural education because it debilitates academics from targeting precise areas of change. I propose that 'a feminist politics of resistance'⁸ that can be practiced by sceptical, politically active women and men architecture academics, is a vital way to resist the diminishing of quality in architectural education.

This chapter is indebted to work of the political scientist, Wendy Brown, on the impact of neoliberalism in academia, and (in general) on democracy, freedom of speech, power and gender equality. In higher education, an established patriarchal model of academic labour constructs and obstructs the formation of alternate values and identities of diverse educators and students opposed to the prioritisation of economically driven architectural education. Following the post-1970s era of Thatcher, architectural education in the UK altered, veering away from a qualitative model to a quantitative self-centred model of higher education. At the core of this shift is the imperative for universities to create highly employable architectural graduate technicians faster and as many as the
architecture schools are allowed to recruit. Because of this, some critics have compared universities to factories both in their design and modes of production.  

**Employability in architectural education**

James Mayo explains that, ‘Operating like a factory has economically served architecture schools moderately well in the past’. Prospective students (and their parents) often choose architecture as a career because, as a profession, it is seen to offer greater job security and income generation post-university. Because of their already healthy intakes, architecture schools are seen as departments that can expand. In order to create new ‘markets’, the number of undergraduates has increased disproportionately to teaching staff. Some schools have developed the digital learning experience with little or no direct teaching contact or established architecture courses in other countries that capture new markets, such as China, attracting post-graduates into their UK programmes. Summer courses are run during non-teaching time and the shift to two shorter semesters rather than three means there is less teaching delivered.

In order to increase their revenue, NPM university administrators (often with no connection with the disciplines they are managing) ‘work with the mentality of the managerial class’ by increasing student intake in national and international markets and changing the demographic of their academic workforce. Architecture academics who teach are morphing from a workforce of predominantly full time or tenured experts into a part-time, casual, temporary or contingent staff teaching design studios or delivering lectures and seminars with fewer workplace benefits for job security and progression. Academic staff work many more hours than they are remunerated. Casual staff often accept these contracts because they offer them, in the short term, a rate of pay (comparable or higher to the income they are making in practice) and intellectual stimulation (which they might be denied in practice) that can in the long term increase their reputational capital. To quote Brown, ‘Younger faculty, raised on neoliberal careerism, are generally unaware that there could be alternative academic purposes and practices to those organized by a neoliberal table of values’. Their labour exploitation is a key way in which schools of architecture justify their ‘bang for buck’ or cost-to-benefit ratio. When professors or other full time staff leave or retire they are often replaced with staff without equivalent qualifications for cost saving reasons. While the university gains from its economically rational business model, there are detrimental effects on the quality of teaching delivered to students but this is camouflaged through the reason for an architectural education.

Neoliberalism in schools of architecture focuses on the short-term vocational goal of making students instantly employable, efficient “factory workers” (who can maximise the money they can make for their employers). Free student labour, undertaken as ‘live projects’ for outside clients in architecture schools, is practice exploitative. On the teaching shop floor, areas of the architecture curriculum – its liberal arts aspects, namely history and theory – that are deemed to be speculative or less obviously economically generative can be devalued under academic capitalism. Technical skills enhancing revenue-generating productivity in students are given equal if not greater
value because they increase the chances of employability. This has a detrimental effect on architectural practice and architecture because it disables a graduate’s long-term goal to be an independent and critical architectural thinker and designer. Nowadays students are encouraged to gain employment in a firm or to start their own practice as soon as possible without having developed their own architectural position, steadily over years of practice mentoring. There is also the more insidious suggestion that one trains as an architect to become a consultant whose rate of pay is higher than that of a salaried architect. Alternatively because of the low rate of pay in the profession, some students are veering towards starting their own entrepreneurial multidisciplinary visualisation company (a new market for the profession) or model-making company rather than architectural practice, creating a division of labour in the architectural production process prioritising the image of architecture for advertising, selling or winning jobs.¹⁴

The university’s administratively heavy methods of assessment have also followed neoliberal quantitative, checking systems used in manufacturing. Laurence argues that, ‘the university, like the hospital or the prison, can be understood as an apparatus of perpetual examination’.¹⁵ He contends that a process of standardisation or normalisation occurs in order to acculturate students into disciplinary norms: ‘The student is constantly evaluated, graded, measured, created. The abnormal is marginalized, rejected, and excluded. The human sciences develop and the university introduces the student to a world where everything can be measured, including their imaginations’.¹⁶

The consequence of this ‘examinatorial power is the invention of a new type of . . . calculable individual’.¹⁷ NPM driven universities present students as consumers or “clients” of measurable academic services and academics as “service providers.” Many educators accept this unquestionably. The shift in relationship from educator/mentor-student/mentee to educator/manufacturer-student/client has dire consequences in terms of pedagogical practice. National Student Surveys (NSS) in the UK and university rankings are the indicators of an undergraduate programme’s strength, and with that the strength and quality of a school of architecture. Happy “clients” in high revenue generating universities lead to a good NSS ranking. Students often have more power, than staff, to complain and to get response from senior managers. “Client satisfaction” means that staff complaints are devalued or ignored and staff, particularly younger staff, are fearful to voice their opinions. For staff with full time and fractional posts teaching and research are both under constant quantitative surveillance.

More permanent staff are required to teach and offer pastoral care to increasingly large student numbers while actively researching to produce internationally recognised research and obtain funding (to buy out their research and teaching time). Operating like a factory worker, producing and satisfying clients and producing and disseminating world-renowned research, requires that architecture academics work such long hours that they have limited time or opportunity to slowly evolve and construct new research or knowledge. The academic is given minimum time to think and to produce ‘deliverables’, from which the university can make revenue. As work hours grow, the time to rest decreases. This imbalance has detrimental affects on staff mental and physical health.
A 24/7 work life

According to Jonathan Crary, ‘in relation to labor, [a 24/7 work life] renders plausible, even normal, the idea of working without pause, without limits. It is aligned with what is inanimate, inert, or unageing’. Crary notes the ‘features that distinguish living beings from machines’ include the need for pause or for rest. But ‘24/7 markets and a global infrastructure for continuous work and consumption’ undermine this. Globalised architectural practice (where a firm creates architecture across multiple time zones and countries so that a job never stops being worked on) is not questioned under neoliberalism. In fact, many profit-driven practitioners see this as the sign of a successful, ‘healthy’ practice.

Some universities have shifted to 24/7 architectural studio and library opening hours to support, enable and encourage high productivity. Building in part upon the model of the Beaux-Arts architect working tirelessly and happily in their arts studio, architectural programmes encourage students to work continuously ‘without breaks’ and to demand email responses from their educators 24/7. New technology allows 24/7 labour and penetrates the domestic domain of architectural students and academics. Crary contends that time to regenerate ‘is now simply too expensive to be structurally possible within contemporary capitalism’.

In *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* Arlie Russell Hochschild refers to the 1936 comedy film, *Modern Times*, starring Charlie Chaplin (Figures 1 and 2). Hochschild notes that the speedup of labour in modern life is no longer confined to work and now ‘extends to the home’. The architecture student or academic is hurried and stretched in their university workplace and, if they have family or carer commitments, hurries others. Like Chaplin’s character in the film, more and more architecture students and academics are suffering mental and physical illness, burnout or exhaustion. In a work-oriented paradox, rather than reduce excessive workloads, most architecture schools create more work within the university through elaborate bureaucratic systems for medical and psychological support for staff and students or externally run wellbeing classes and courses for employees, often outside set work hours. Those able to survive and thrive in high-pressure work environments are rewarded for their ability to be tirelessly productive for the university’s success. In *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution of Home*, Hochschild and Machung contend that universities favour ‘family-free people’ because they are able to be optimally productive.

Economic man, creativity and entrepreneurship

From 1978 to 1979, Michel Foucault examined neoliberalism through a series of lectures that considered the link between governmentality (or ‘the art of government’) and the exertion of power. In the book of the collated lectures entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault notes the changing relationship between biology and politics (biopolitics) and the powerful role that *homo oeconomicus* or economic man plays in neoliberalism. Economic man is highly employable and productive. They are family-free (this does not
mean they are without a family but that they do not have primary care responsibilities, thereby giving them more time to work). They are entrepreneurial, using creativity to gain a market edge in the global economy. Economic man is consumed with self-interest, and adopts rationality for maximum economic gain. In her reflection on Foucault’s lectures, Brown notes that under neoliberalism’s free market advocacy economic man ‘takes its shape as human capital seeking to strengthen its competitive positioning and appreciate its value’. Economic man today acts out the ‘ever-growing intimacy of corporate and finance capital with the state’ and ensures that everything is for sale. Economic rationalism demands that education, healthcare, falling pregnant and even dating are commoditised to maximise return on investment.

_Homo oeconomicus_ in a university setting is family-free, productive and entrepreneurial. Slaughter and Leslie argue that ‘globalization [has created] new structures, incentives, and rewards for some aspects of academic careers and is simultaneously instituting constraints and disincentives for other aspects of careers’. Pressure has risen in universities for academics to bring in external money from industry or research funding bodies, taking them out of what some have called the ‘ivory tower’ into corporate life. In public UK institutions ‘state funding of universities is “tied” to a set of academic productivity metrics that measure knowledge according to “impact”’. The rationality of _homo oeconomicus_ working in the university quantifies and measures outputs and the numbers of people on social media networks reading that research through tweets, LinkedIn followers etc. Those who elect not to participate at this level of being quantified for their ‘academic credit rating’ become uncompetitive and unattractive for university promotion. Because as Brown notes, neoliberalism accentuates inequality rather than fosters it, as it falsely claims, all of those who are not ‘socially male and masculinist within a persistently gendered economic ontology and division of labor’ are disadvantaged. To quote Brown further, ‘this is so regardless of whether men are “stay-at-home fathers,” women are single or childfree, or families are queer. . . . With only competing and value-enhancing human capital in the frame, complex and persistent gender inequality is attributed to sexual difference, an effect that neoliberalism takes for the cause.’

While the _homo oeconomicus_ is a phrase that is not gender specific, entrepreneur meaning ‘to do something’, comes from the 13th century French masculine verb entreprendre. Because of its use in John Stuart Mill’s _Principles of Political Economy_, it became popular and was used to describe an entrepreneur as both a risk taker and business manager.

There are parallels between the entrepreneurial business outside the university and the entrepreneurial university surrounding global market capture. The entrepreneurial university aims to spread ‘throughout the world (encouraging excellence and innovation in an environment of mutual competitive rivalry)’ in order to ‘enhance . . . their own institution’ in the ‘global university space’. According to Biernacki, ‘Economics instrumentalizes creativity as a factor of production’. Creativity in an academic arena is co-opted by neoliberalism for revenue making. As Schwartzberg explains: ‘The popular notion of “creativity” is particularly interesting because it has become a generalized imperative of neoliberalized societies: creativity (and its proxies, “innovation” and
“disruption”) are seen today as an essential component of any “competitive” worker. It is because of the ability of ‘creativity [to] make new worlds out of nothing’ and to ‘measure . . . productivity as a kind of surplus value relative to other inputs’ that economists such as Richard Florida have defined the value of the ‘creative class’ in which architects and architectural researchers sit comfortably.

Before graduation, universities offer incentive programmes to enhance student entrepreneurship. Career academics (who never leave working in the university) typically construct one path of research through which to consolidate their, and their university’s, reputation for innovation. Creating a unique field of research requires long-time research (better done in large teams) on a topic that has been chosen early.

Students and academic researchers who are not ‘family free’ in universities are disadvantaged by the entrepreneurial turn. The persistent gender attainment gap, pay gap and promotion gap in universities attests to inequalities premised on long working hours. Morley contends that women (and I would add men) academics with family care responsibilities are ‘caught between two greedy institutions – the extended family and the university . . . A dominant view is that time expended on role performance in one domain depletes time available for the demands of the other domain’.

Pillay writes that academic mothers find it difficult to balance ‘two lives’ because the juggle can lead to ‘going nowhere slowly’. She suggests that the transitional space in-between motherhood and the intellectual self is not always ‘smooth’. Academics with family care responsibilities are pressured because ‘each role absorbs enormous psychological, intellectual, and emotional energy’. Academic mothers, fathers and carers have to rationalise the tasks required of them in both their domestic and professional spheres so as to ‘become highly efficient, serious and single minded by compartmentalising work life and family life’.

Resisting academic capitalism

Unlike private corporations, universities have had a shorter period of running their own ‘businesses’ and are not currently supporting gender equity of their academic staff within their organisations. Koppes Bryan and Wilson note that ‘It is a somewhat perplexing reality that higher education lags behind other sectors . . . Major corporations long ago recognized the need to adjust personnel policies to attract and retain men and women seeking to better “balance” career and family . . . While colleges and universities are perceived as being highly progressive, the fact of the matter is that higher education is an extremely conservative enterprise when it comes to change’. In this period of transition to entrepreneurial university, many schools of architecture are currently exploiting both their ‘human (academic) capital’ and ‘cultural capital’. Architecture academics, supported by upper management, need to actively acknowledge and resist many of the economically instigated changes presented to them by their universities for reasons I will explain below.

The absorption of neoliberalism does not sit comfortably within the academic community because it disempowers the fundamental role that universities have as
agents for social correction. As Simon Sadler notes: ‘The model of the university as a locus for criticism within the dense relations of capitalism depends on the possibility of immanent critique – on locating the contradictions in the rules and systems necessary to production’.48 Academics need to have a critical distance from production, but the co-option of neoliberalism by universities contradicts this. Olssen claims that neoliberalism’s departure from the welfare state tradition has attacked the notion of public interest, which had formerly underpinned western models of bureaucracy and government.49

The nurturing of competitive marketplace tactics that pit design studios or research clusters against one another are gender biased because they advocate macho aggression.50 According to Olssen, ‘although it is essential in economic contexts to ensure norms of fair cooperation in order to avoid monopolies and the centralization of economic power, in many community contexts, including families, and frequently in work places, reciprocal social relations depend upon cooperative behaviour, and facilitation, rather than competition. One of the crucial failings of unbridled neoliberalism from the perspective of educators, … is that it seeks to institute competition as the central structuring norm of a society on the grounds that this best promotes efficient institutional and behavioural forms’.51

Academic selflessness, rather than selfishness, will allow the employment of tactics of resistance. Some tactics invite academics to look after the wellbeing of themselves and their family and their colleagues by resisting the demands put on them by their managers. Others encourage academics to look after the wellbeing of their students and public welfare as their professional responsibility.

The eleven female authors and members of the Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective argue that a slow scholarship movement is one way of resisting the university pressures put on academics for high productivity.52 The authors set out a range of ‘strategies to resist the compressed temporal regimes of the neoliberal university [so as] to stop, reflect, reject, resist, subvert, and collaborate to cultivate different, more reflexive academic cultures’.53 They are to: 1. Talk about and support slow strategies; 2. Count what others don’t; 3. Organize; 4. Take care; 5. Write fewer emails; 6. Turn off email; 7. Make time to think; 8. Make time to write (differently); 9. Say no. Say yes; and 10. Reach for the minimum (number of outputs and amount of grant funding). These are some practical proactive steps to surviving short-term pressures and go some way to challenging the efficiency and quantitative valuing demanded of *homo oeconomicus* academics.

Still, for disciplinary specificity, I would add that it might simply be enough to question, at every moment of our working life, the labour we are asked to perform. It might be enough that we do not simply acquiesce to top-down governance that prioritises only the economic value of humanity and self-promotion. We must critically examine the relationship between our biology and politics and between the city and the soul. Over the twenty years I have been in architectural education, women, men, gays and lesbians who have been disadvantaged or discriminated against have offered, from their marginalised spaces, voices of reason in what is otherwise a peculiarly ‘macho’ masculinist world that propels us uncritically towards a future few of us are brave enough to challenge. Resistance will be most effective, as Brown has exemplified, through free academic
speech represented in our writing and talking with our academic peers, students and the public. We need to work actively to ground our students and us through retaining pity, empathy and generosity within an academic community. I encourage us to work specifically to re-value citizenship over economic growth and self-interest in our individual careers. Architecture academics need to acknowledge and question at every opportunity the neoliberalisation of schools of architecture premised on marketisation, economisation and optimisation. The mistrust of the 'ivory tower' intellectual realm instigated by industry, and implemented by governments, undermines the importance of the academic voice and we must resist this to retain quality in architectural education and in architectural production outside the university.

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Tonia Carless and Philip Baker for their generous feedback to this chapter.

Notes
1 Charlie Chaplin, dir., Modern Times (USA, 1936).
3 Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (London: Routledge, 2002/1966). In the premodern university, Foucault contends people’s limits were defined in relation to God or outside the living world. After modernity, people’s limits became defined within the living world and the role of scholars was to direct society. It was the state’s role to support this cultural trajectory, not demand direct economic returns.
5 Slaughter and Leslie, Academic Capitalism, 1.
11 Ibid., 81.
12 Contingent labour describes on-demand labour in a neutral way so that businesses can camouflage their motives. Casual and temporary have different connotations.
15 Mike Laurence, ‘Reconstituting the Political: Foucault and the Modern University’ (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Ontario, Canada, September, 2009). Laurence refers to Gilles Deleuze writings on Foucault but not to Deleuze’s control societies specifically.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 14.
20 Ibid., 3.
22 Crary, 24/7, 14–15.
24 Ibid., 225.
29 Ibid., 29.
30 Ibid., 31.
33 Ibid., 107.
34 Ibid., 107.
43 Ibid., viii.
44 One mother, quoted in ibid., 30.
47 Koppes Bryan and Wilson argue that academic leaders should take the lead in changing the work culture in colleges and universities through ‘facilitating a work-life culture that is supportive of faculty, staff, and students.’ Ibid., 2.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Mountz et al., ‘For Slow Scholarship,’ 1249–1253.
53 Ibid., 1249.