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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Integrating Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into architectural pedagogy: An assessment experiment of three retrofitted buildings in the city of Glasgow

Ashraf M. Salama*, Laura Maclean

Department of Architecture, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G1 1XJ, UK

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Abstract

Recently there has been a growing trend to encourage learning outside the classrooms, so-called 'universities without walls.' To this end, mechanisms for learning beyond the boundaries of classroom settings can provide enhanced and challenging learning opportunities. This paper introduces Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a mechanism that integrates various forms of inquiry into learning. AI is operationalized as a Walking Tour assessment project which was introduced as part of the class *Cultural and Behavioural Factors in Architecture and Urbanism* delivered at the Department of Architecture, University of Strathclyde - Glasgow where thirty-two Master of Architecture students were enrolled. The Walking Tour assessment involved the exploration of 6 factors that delineate key design characteristics in three retrofitted buildings in Glasgow: Theatre Royal, Reid Building, and The Lighthouse. Working in groups, students assessed factors that included context, massing, interface, wayfinding, socio-spatial, and comfort. Findings reveal that students were able to focus on critical issues that go beyond those adopted in traditional teaching practices while accentuating the value of introducing AI and utilizing the built environment as an educational medium. Conclusions are drawn to emphasize the need for structured learning experiences that enable making judgments about building qualities while effectively interrogating various characteristics.

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*Correspondence to: Office JW 302c, Level 3, James Weir Building | 75 Montrose Street, Glasgow G1 1XJ, UK. Tel.: +44 141 548 3995.
E-mail addresses: ashraf.salama@strath.ac.uk, asalama@gmail.com (A.M. Salama), laura.maclean@strath.ac.uk (L. Maclean).
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1. Introduction: contextualizing Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Advancing a learning environment that cultivates exploration and critical thinking are becoming a priority in higher education institutions. Inquiry based learning (IBL) and research led teaching continue to be viewed as approaches integral to emerging pedagogies in architecture and urbanism. In order to take full advantage of the unique opportunities these approaches may offer, this paper argues for the need to strengthen professional education through exposing students to various forms of research processes. It proposes such an exposure to primary source materials leading to the production and reproduction of different types of knowledge in order to complement traditional teaching practices that emphasize secondary sources information and the consumption of knowledge.

Building on the *ethos* of the University of Strathclyde as “a place of useful learning” in its contemporary interpretation the paper elucidates a paradigm of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as it relates to architecture and urbanism. Recent literature emphasizes that AI is based on the premise that human systems are made and imagined by those who live and work within them (Cooperrider, 2000; Hammond, 1998; Watkins and Mohr, 2001). AI harnesses the drive and imagination of individuals, groups, and institutions (Cockell and McArthur-Blair, 2013). Contrary to problem-solving techniques where the primary focus is on what is wrong or broken, AI focuses attention on what works well in the physical environment and how it can be enhanced.

Deciphering the principles upon which AI is founded, the paper identifies inquiry-based, active, and experiential learning as response mechanisms that complement traditional lecture format where offering students ready-made interpretations about the built environment is an inherited practice. The paper demonstrates the implementation of one of these mechanisms in an *option class* taught by the first author and in which the second author was a student, in the Spring Semester 2015, at the Department of Architecture, University of Strathclyde - Glasgow where thirty two Master of Architecture students were enrolled: AB966/AB988: *Cultural and Behavioural Factors in Architecture and Urbanism*. For structuring purposes, the case of the *option class* is outlined together with its key learning outcomes and the implementation of AI is analysed within an approach to learning beyond the boundaries of classroom settings.

While the class offers a number of mechanisms, the focus in this paper is on assessing three retrofitted buildings that formed part of a research project conducted by the students as a form of AI. Primarily, the project builds on the fact that Glasgow's contemporary architecture scene is thriving, with World-renowned architects and celebrated buildings emerging across the city. It also follows that the city has seen a trend towards building renovation and restoration as part of retrofitting and building extension efforts to provide an opportunity to protect and conserve the architectural merit of existing buildings, which over time have lost their ability to meet the needs of users due to emerging needs and changes in use or programmatic requirements. In essence this is enabling the city to retain

its meaningful architectural qualities, thus preserving its character and culture. Retrofitted buildings are predominantly important in cities such as Glasgow, whose heritage and identity are strongly linked with a specific architectural approach. In Glasgow, it is the distinct ‘Glasgow Style’, which was formed by a number of 19th and 20th century architects and designers, such as Alexander Thomson and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Consequently, much of these buildings have been protected and retrofitted, such as Mackintosh's School of Art, and the Glasgow Herald Building, which are both still in use today.

Adopting and implementing AI in the form of in and off class exercises in different contexts reveal that structured actions and experiences help students to be in control over their learning while invigorating their understanding of the body of knowledge delivered in a typical lecture format (Salama, 2012a). Combined, active and experiential learning mechanisms offer architecture students multiple learning opportunities. It is noted that the perspective of the first author who taught the class and that of the second author who experienced the learning process are integrated to offer the overall crux of the argument as well as the concluding reflections. By and large, while not exclusive the results accentuate the value of introducing AI while utilizing the built environment as an educational medium. Students' feedback reveals that through the implementation of these mechanisms the majority has developed a deeper understanding of the relationship (a) between the two widely held conceptions of the built environment; the conceptual/subjective and the physical/objective, (b) between people and the settings they use, and (c) between spatial and sustainable design factors from a socio-behavioural perspective. In essence, they were able to focus on critical issues that go beyond those adopted in traditional teaching practices.

2. Problematizing Appreciative Inquiry (AI) through inquiry-based, active and experiential learning

Emerging from the fields of organizational behavioural and management, there are a considerable number of definitions that can be found in AI literature exhibiting multiple views. However, theorists view it as “... the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential” (Cooperrider, 2000). It is also viewed as a form of action research that is visionary in nature and aims to create new ideas and images that aid in developmental change (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

Inquiry-based learning is an instructional method developed during the sixties that continues to characterise current interests in higher education (Bruner, and Ackoff, 1961, 1974). This approach was developed in response to a perceived failure of more traditional forms of instruction and rote learning wherein students were required to simply memorize and reproduce instructional materials. In essence, active and experiential learning are sub-forms of inquiry-based learning (IBL): in this methodology progress is assessed by how well students develop experiential, critical thinking and analytical

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