Bard Architecture Podcast

00:00 Josh: Welcome back everyone, to the next edition of our podcast series. Today we're talking about architecture at Bard. I am Josh Tyler, I'm one of the Assistant Directors of Admission, and as always, I'm here with Mackie Siebens, the Director of Admission.

00:14 Mackie: Hello Josh!

00:15 Josh: Hey Mackie!

00:16 Mackie: As Josh said, I'm Mackie Siebens, I'm the Director of Admission and I graduated from Bard in 2012. And we're joined today by faculty who are teaching students in the architecture program. So, if you guys want to introduce yourselves, we'll start here?

00:29 Ivonne: Sure, thank you for having us. I'm Ivonne Santoyo Orozco, I'm an assistant professor in architecture. A little bit about myself, I've been both on the side of a practitioner and on the side of academia. I have worked for a number of practices, from very kind of small firms, kind of more… very large corporate practices. I am also very invested in my own research, my research deals mainly with questions of property relating architecture with question of property, especially in Mexico. We're excited to start this program.

01:20 Mackie: Yeah, we're excited to have you guys here!

01:22 Ross: Hi, yeah thank you for having us. I'm Ross Adams, I'm also an architect-in-training and in practice, but I've dedicated the last, let's say the most recent decade of my life to scholarship and writing, mainly about two sorts of strands. One is kind of a historical and conceptual understanding of the urban as a space, or urbanization. I've got a book called Circulation and Urbanization, which is just out this last year, but I've also spent a lot of time writing about climate change, and the ways in which architects and urban designers have addressed the question of climate change specifically, looking at the problematic structures of things like sustainability and resilience, and trying to kind of open up new ways in which we can approach these very difficult questions.

02:16 Josh: Fantastic.

02:17 Mackie: Great, thanks.

02:19 Josh: So, can you share with us kind of how the architecture program came to be at Bard, and what really the vision and kind of purpose of the program, and what you think students will draw from it?

02:30 Ross: Yeah, well I think it's still probably a work in progress, as we aren't totally a program yet, but we have a sort of proposal I'd say right now, that starts to feel quite solid, and I think, you know, again it's an ongoing conversation, should we discuss the nature of that proposal at the moment, or the structure of the curriculum at this moment, or…?

02:55 Mackie: Sure! Yeah, absolutely.

02:57 Ivonne: I mean, I think it's important to say the good news as well – every new program has a series, goes through a series of approval. We have passed through the first one, which I think is a very important one, which we are under the Division of Arts, and Division of Arts has already approved the curriculum, so that means that it's going to the next phase, and we have received very positive feedback. I think the conversation about the architecture at Bard starts even, it has already been in, as far as we understand, in conversation for quite some time, so this precedes us and I hope it will go beyond us.

03:44 Ross: Which is to say, it's a question we probably cannot fully answer ourselves, knowing there's an institutional discussion that precedes us. I think the vision we have for architecture here at Bard is one that builds on the sort of opportunities around opening an architecture program that's not a professional program, a NAAB accredited – the National Architecture Accreditation Board – accredited program, I think it's a moment right now, when there's a lot of discussion about how to change architectural pedagogy. And there are lots of really good moves taking place in a lot of interesting schools, but especially in the States, I think that's quite difficult to do when you're within a five-year, professional structure. So, we see this as a really interesting opportunity to take that conversation a lot further hopefully, within the structure at Bard, building on the connections that it's going to have within the school and with other programs. Our vision let's say, for the program is about somehow understanding architecture as a practice of collective, sort of future making, of understanding the role that the imaginary, plays within architecture, that architecture's most, let's say public-facing product is often the images that we produce, and the sort of visions of various futures that are going on, and I think these are sites of great contestation, and we see that as a way of kind of opening up possibilities for architecture.

05:23 Ivonne: Yeah, and I think it's important to say that architecture is on the one hand prepositive, and on the other hand is entangled with the world. We really want to kind of, dwell on this relation, on the one hand this is, it brings about a new reality, and on the other hand, it's entangled in sociopolitical, environmental questions. So, I think something we're doing from the beginning is making sure that we emphasize this double relation, which is something that I think Bard is already doing in many other programs. And I think Bard almost naturally, it's almost surprising that we didn't have an architecture program, there is an appreciation of architecture, but there is also an appreciation of that space, that buildings are not just isolated objects, that are related to questions of waste management, energy, resource extraction, displacement even, gentrification, so we really think that it's a wonderful opportunity to start anew, but nevertheless to emphasize that there are these two prominent avenues, on the one hand the imagination, and on the other hand a critical response to our reality.

06:44 Mackie: Yeah, sure. And can you talk a little bit about what students have been doing in the last year, the program is sort of in flux, it's developing, it's sort of in progress, but you've definitely been active on campus and working with students, so can you talk a little bit about what students have been doing specifically?

07:01 Ross: Sure, yeah, we've really been working – and this may be quite obvious – on the sort of front end of the program, getting students into the architecture program. The main emphasis I would say, has been teaching introductory, or let's say level 1 sort of studios, that basically provide a series of techniques and software proficiencies and so forth, to students so that we can start actually building an architectural knowledge around the practice of design. But I think actually in doing that, one of the things we've wanted to do with introductory studio courses is to, and this is again sort of going against what tends to be the practice in most places, we're trying to build the learning let's say of basic architectural techniques around a kind of critical discourse, and around certain histories of architecture and histories of representation, so that we see it as a situated practice. We don't want to spend endless time, you know, asking students to kind of, preform architectural techniques without somehow also critically assessing what they're doing. So that's the sort of big emphasis with us. And around this notion we've sort of, we've started by taking the studio as not simply a studio space where you create around a certain brief, and you take then a history class over there, and a critical theoretical class over there, but we're trying to sort of integrate those things into what we're talking about as a sort of studio/seminar hybrid. That's I think where our emphasis has been, and we'll sort of build out the depth of the program as it itself builds, an in fact, as of next year already.

08:43 Ivonne: Yeah, I am at the moment not teaching a studio, but teaching a seminar, and it's almost kind of opened up other frameworks of analysis of how we analyze architecture, because I think it's also how do we see, ways of seeing, ways of understanding architecture have to be part of this story. So, I'm teaching a course called Architectural Entanglements with Labor, and basically what we're trying to do is shift to the foreground questions of maintenance, questions of labor, questions of resources. So, for example, one of the tasks students have to imagine is, for example, what is the house, if we reimagine that through the lenses of maintenance, of labor, of domestic labor, and it's interesting, so basically we are trying to set up different – and it's not the only one – but we'll try to set up and invite other people to bring new ways of understanding architecture in which other forms of imagination could be possible.

09:47 Mackie: Great! Yeah it sounds like there are definitely ways to, for students, as is typical at Bard, from different fields and practices currently, to kind of move their way into architecture, because it's so linked with so many other things, which is great.

10:03 Josh: despite that you're in the Arts program, it's very interdisciplinary in many ways, which seems like that's much the approach in how this wanted to be put together, from the beginning –

10:15 Ross: Yeah, definitely.

10:16 Josh: And so, for the current classes that students have, how much of the class is more theoretically based, and kind of discussing these issues, and how much of it is more hands on, designing, these structures with these things in mind?

10:37 Ross: Yeah, that's a great question and it's honestly something we're still calibrating. This is a new format for us, and I think you know, we're very kind of, critical to the ways in which we're, that we're teaching, and the ways in which the studios are unfolding. So, right now, it's, I would say it's one quarter theoretical, historical, sort of exposure to knowledge of architecture as a field, and let's say three quarters design work, and it is in part is simply because design work is a labor intensive process, almost no matter how you cut it. But also, it's trying to work in a studio model that is also different from the typical standard ways in which we teach architectural studio elsewhere, mainly in terms of the time. Typically schools of architecture allocate about twelve hours of class time per week, on top of which they have to do lots of continued work outside of that, and we think that's too much in all sense, but mainly because it allows students to develop a bit of complacency, you know, they wait to be told every day they sit down what to do somehow, and we're trying to empower students more, and have them a bit more self-motivated, and I think we've taken that model a little bit from the ways in which architecture is taught in places like the UK and Holland, where both of us have studied. So it's a balance, and we'll see how this sort of unfolds when we start to develop other classes that have lined up as well, how they start to speak – what we really want is that the classes also speak to one another, so that it's not isolated or siloed forms of knowledge that each class somehow carries.

12:35 Ivonne: It will be definitely design based, but it's, what questions do you ask to techniques that we already have? So it's not just about drawing, because of course it's important to teach them how to draw, but it's what questions do we ask to those techniques that we are giving them, and I think, so it's a fine balance, and I think towards the beginning, it's more technique based, and towards the end, it's about the students perhaps developing their own techniques and I think that's the aspiration, that towards the end they will feel confident enough to imagine other forms of presentation.

13:17 Ross: Maybe, just to add on to that, I think it's important to mention that we have a kind of sequence in mind, for the program. Because I think it divide it outright, saying it's this percentage and that percentage isn't necessarily accurate. What we're doing is building a kind of sequence that pedagogically, let's say, moves throughout the program. So, we're basing these on a kind of, let's say an attitude or a term that for each step of that sequence, that tries, again, to speak across the issues that students will encounter within other classes. And so, the first of those sequences is what we're calling planetary – it's about opening ways of understanding multi scalar relationalities that architecture necessarily participates in, ways of sort of opening beyond the scope of architecture as a kind of isolated discipline. The second sequence we call constituencies, which is based on kind of grounding those practices in conversation with movements and groups of people, social movements let's say, that want to look at things like housing rights, or social justice or ecological justice movements and sort of taking practices to the ground.

14:40 Ivonne: And just to add, that specific part of the sequence allows to interact and engage with the community beyond Bard. So, for example, engaging with people that have housing questions in Kingston, in Hudson, so there will be that ambition too.

14:58 Mackie: Great!

14:58 Ivonne: And the last part of the sequence is futures, and this is really the experimental part in which we ask them to use everything they have learned to open up new imaginaries of how we live together.

15:14 Mackie: Great! That sounds wonderful. Sounds really exciting. And I guess just before we end, I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about how the two of you respectively found architecture, how it entered your lives or how you entered the world of architecture itself.

15:32 Ivonne: Well, in my case, I'm originally from Mexico City, I think architecture, and I have spent most of my life abroad, I have to say, I studied in Italy, Holland, London, and I worked and taught in London for many, many years, probably most of my professional life has been there as well as in the Midwest. I think experiencing different, I think seeing the city, seeing kind of how space constructs a certain society has been always part of me, I think specifically coming from Mexico City, that is something that kind of you notice in your everyday life, it's something that you cannot oversee, it is something that is in front of you. I am also, nevertheless, the daughter of a developer. So I saw plans in front of me from a very early age, so I have a more conventional path towards architecture, I was always really motivated, but I was always motivated more for the sociopolitical questions that it comes, and to see it materialize, this idea that you can transform that through the design to me was fascinating.

17:13 Ross: Yeah, I think my route to architecture let's say is a bit more circuitous. I have a degree in biomaterial sciences, which I basically was like, "nope!" I'm going to go work for architects, and so I actually just started working in New York and in Connecticut very first, for a number of architects, and then for myself working in a firm in Holland, called MVRDV, which at the time was doing really exciting work and perhaps still is, and so ever since then, I've kind of come in let's say through the back door of architecture, I then finally jumped into a Master's program in the US, I wasn't really excited about it and so I went back to Holland, finished my Master degree at a school called the Berlage Institute, which at the time was doing I think really amazing work, and from there that's kind of been my world, let's say. So, I don't know, I've been bouncing around let's say, trying to kind of perfect this set, of whatever, ideas I had in my head that finally culminated in what we're doing right now which feels really great.

18:30 Mackie: Yeah! Well, thank you for sharing your respective stories with us, and for answering our questions, I don't have any other questions, do you Josh?

18:40 Josh: I don't, we really appreciate it! It's exciting to kind of be at the ground level of this, and to watch it grow!

18:45 Ross: Us too! Thank you for inviting us to come and talk!

18:47 Ivonne: Thank you!

18:48 Mackie: Sure!

18:48 Josh: Our pleasure.

18:50 Mackie: And for everyone listening, as always, if you have questions, please reach out to us at admission@bard.edu and we will talk to you next time. Thanks!

18:59 Josh: Thanks, looking forward to it!