# Reflections on Extracurricular Activities (ECAs) as a Pedagogy in Architectural Education

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article addresses the implementation of Extracurricular Activities (ECAs) as a tool for architectural knowledge acquisition in schools of architecture worldwide. The presented ECAs could play a role to fill gaps mentioned in the Architects Registration Board (ARB) proposal for modernising the initial education and training of architects in the UK and emphasises the civic function of architectural education in Europe. Students' participation in ECAs gave them a better learning experience and contributed positively to their academic performance. Thus, the motive behind introducing ECAs is to improve students' skills and engage them in other activities contributing to their overall learning experience.*

**KEYWORDS**

*extracurricular activities, architecture, education, pedagogy, reform*

This paper reflects on the author's implementation of 20 years of higher education experience to introduce ECAs in the schools of architecture in four different countries, namely the UK, Turkey, Egypt and Bahrain. These ECAs were not part of the students' curriculum but contributed indirectly to their fields of study and knowledge acquisition in related fields. These included creating activities for the students such as: establishing a film club, running research and design seminars, organising and participating in summer schools, engaging with the community through design activities and encouraging participation in conferences. Community engagement ECAs demonstrate to students the importance of civic engagement and the role universities play in producing socially responsible graduates.

The output of these ECAs suggests that they can provide a better learning experience for students at many levels; it is positively linked to academic achievement, it enhances students overall experience and improves their acquisition of skills, it increases their employability, in addition to its contribution to improving their sense of belonging to the institution, life satisfaction and reducing stress levels.[1]  Observing the benefits of introducing ECAs as an integral part of architectural education could lead to the development of new pedagogical methods contributing positively to students' experience. If a mechanism is developed to measure its outcomes, it could play an important role in architectural knowledge and skills acquisition. Moreover, it might be considered in the current ARB discussions on the reform of architectural education.

In a study conducted in the UK investigating 119 graduates in a wide range of subject areas, it was found that ECAs helped in graduates' effective transition to work. The activities included a wide range of social and leisure activities that the graduates participated in while studying at their universities. The effective transition to work is one of the key points discussed in the ARB report on modernising the initial education and training of architects which acknowledged concern about this transition.[2]  It could be argued that these concerns could be tackled through a set of well-designed ECAs focusing on engagement with the world outside the university. This will support the civic function of the university and its role in the socio-economic development of its community. Students will gain significant experience through introducing them to the outside world which will help in their effective transition to work.

It should be noted that the previously mentioned study did not include any students studying architecture. This might be attributed to the relatively high 'curricular' workload of architecture students during their studies which might not encourage participation in ECAs. This has been confirmed by the results of the AJ's 2016 annual student survey which revealed that the heavy workload for architecture students contributed to the findings that 26% of the surveyed students were receiving or had received medical help for mental health problems, resulting from their course, while a further 26% feared they would

have to seek professional help in the future. It is alarming that more than 50% of the surveyed students were concerned about their mental health as a result of studying architecture.[3]

ECAs can play a role in reducing students' mental health problems and can positively influence their well-being. Another study indicated the effectiveness of ECAs participation in dealing with academic stress and the development of constructive coping strategies.[4] Hence, the importance of integrating ECAs in the academic setting and allowing time for its implementation. However, it should not be treated as an extra burden on students which they have to engage with. It can be linked to the subject areas of the students, but it must not be part of the students' curriculum. This will enhance students' architectural knowledge acquisition and can serve well the ARB's recommendations regarding reform in architectural education adopting an outcome-based approach.[5]

One important aspect of encouraging students' participation is to diversify the ECAs. This will increase their attractiveness through catering for different students' interests which will increase students' engagement. This is similar to the pedagogy of diversifying teaching, learning and assessment methods to accommodate individual differences between students which would lead to a more inclusive pedagogy. Thus, this paper presents a variety of ECAs which were planned and delivered by the author for the purpose of sharing the experience with the architectural educators community to encourage discussions on the importance of ECAs in our academic setting and its role in the current debates on modernising the initial education and training of architects. It presents five ECAs which were well received by students and witnessed significant engagement and facilitation from colleagues. The ECAs are the film club, design and research seminars, community engagement activities, participating in international summer schools and participating in academic conferences.

### The film club

This activity stemmed from the author's research interest in investigating the relationship between film and architecture with a focus on the image of future city and its architecture in science fiction films.[6] Through informal discussions with students about the topic, they showed interest and excitement about their role as future architects in film production as well as shaping the cities of the future. Accordingly, seminars on the topic were organised and attended by students and staff. One main observation in these seminars was the students' interest and engagement in the topic and related discussions. Short videos visualising future architecture were displayed to the attendees who were invited to debate about the portrayal of the architecture and the depiction of the future. Students and staff were fully engaged in analysing building typologies and their architectural styles with a focus on the significance of the implemented architectural elements.

# BOU ARCHITECTURE FILM SERIES

ANTONIO GAUDÍ
A FILM BY HIROSHI TESHIGAHARA

UNFINISHED SPACES

The Venus Project
Designs by Jacque Fresco © 2011

KOOLHAAS
HOUSELIFE
A FILM BY ILA BÊKA & LOUISE LEMOINE
ENTER

MY ARCHITECT
A Son's Journey

"One of the best films of this, or any, year."
–Leonard Maltin, Hot Ticket

"Spellbinding…a *Citizen Kane*-like meditation."
–Robert Kolker, New York Magazine

HOW MUCH DOES YOUR BUILDING WEIGH,
MR. FOSTER?
¿CUANTO PESA SU EDIFICIO, SR. FOSTER?

CANNES
FILM FESTIVAL
2006

TRIBECA
FILM FESTIVAL
2006

SKETCHES OF
FRANK
GEHRY
BY SYDNEY POLLACK

THE VENUS PROJECT
BEYOND POLITICS, POVERTY & WAR

**BRING YOUR LUNCH AND JOIN US EVERY THURSDAY FROM 13:00 TO 14:00 IN STUDIO A2 - 314**
FOR FILM SUGGESTIONS PLEASE CONTACT DR ISLAM ABOHELA: ISLAM.ABOHELA@BOU.EDU.TR

*Figure 1*:
Film club poster (Islam Abohela 2015).

This experience inspired the author to use short videos, alongside other methods to support the delivery of teaching sessions. Using videos and other multimedia tools has always been a successful method for creating a vibrant and dynamic learning environment for the students.[7] It was noted that some students, who were not engaging in regular classes, were actively participating in the discussions. This encouraged creating a library of films, which can be used as educational material for different sessions related to architectural design, building sciences and other architecture modules. Films ranged from documentary to science fiction films, and the library was shared with colleagues who implemented them in their teaching and reflected positively on the students' satisfaction.

Organising the film club required preparations involving scheduling, choosing session moderators from the faculty, liaising with admission and registration for allocating halls for the activity biweekly, designing the event poster , engaging the students in publicity, inviting fellow students, and organising the whole activity (Fig.1). After the film club was run successfully for one semester, the students were empowered by handing over to them the organisation and delivery of the sessions, so they were responsible for all aspects related to the film club with some guidance from the author and other faculty members. These sessions positively affected the students intellectually and

developed their interest in different aspects of the built environment which reflected positively on their academic performance. The pedagogic benefits of this activity were strongly linked to developing students' knowledge of a variety of architecture and urban design related topics and contributing to their graduate attributes in relation to engaging in discourse relating to architectural culture, theory and design.

One of the students mentioned that this experience opened his eyes to the field of film set design which he would be interested in pursuing as a career. Another student mentioned that these sessions developed her interest in doing a Masters degree on the relationship between film and architecture, while a third student expressed how her experience of watching films has changed after attending the film club as she is more interested in the details of the architectural elements used in films. On the other hand, a student mentioned that he now pays more attention to the architecture in the film more than the film plot which takes away part of the entertainment aspect of watching these films. The feedback from students demonstrates how an ECA can contribute to students' understanding of current debates in architecture and how to develop their interest in engaging in these debates and linking them to the gained knowledge through their courses. It also demonstrates how these activities can help the students think beyond their curriculum and act as a catalyst for exploring future endeavours in relation to their societies needs.

### Design and research seminars

These seminars were organised on a biweekly basis alternating with the above-mentioned film club sessions. In addition to inviting academic staff members and guest speakers, students were also invited as speakers on topics of their interest. The seminars were delivered by both students and staff with occasional guest speakers from outside the institution. Reaching out to speakers from the local community enhances the civic role of the university and encourages students to understand the wider role of the university within the local community. However, it should be noted that academic staff contribution was greater than that of students or guest speakers. The topics of the seminars varied significantly but were linked to architecture. They included presentations on current research by staff members as well as topics related to professional practice.

The main aim of the seminars was to link research with teaching and learning activities and widen the scope of knowledge for our students as well as informing the faculty about their colleagues' research interests to explore collaboration opportunities. Moreover, a better approach motivated by the civic role of the university, is to focus these seminars on engagement with the outside world and the way in which both, the university and the local community, enhance each other. The seminars had a direct impact on the faculty in terms of producing joint research between themselves and
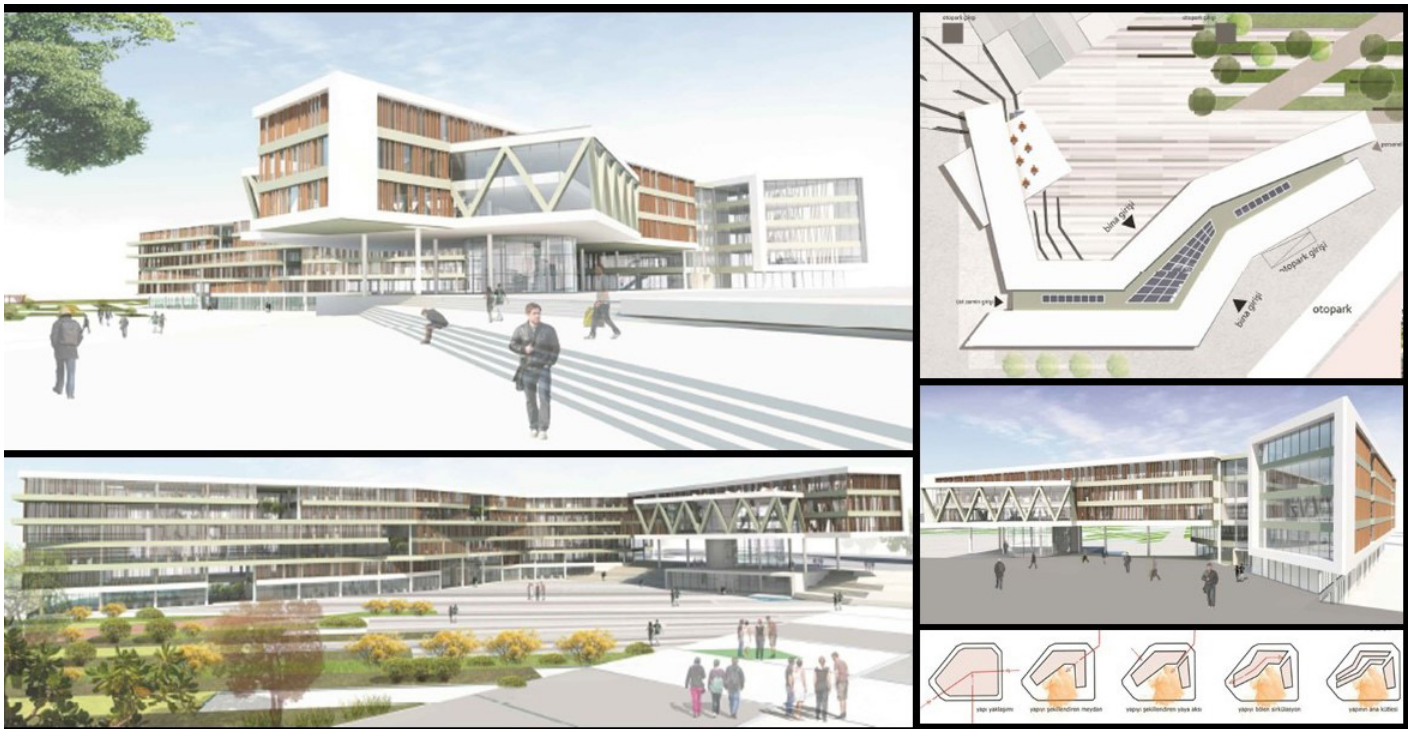
students. The feedback from students was mainly focused on the benefit of being exposed to a wide range of topics which increased their knowledge in different fields and raised their awareness of the importance of research. They also mentioned that these seminars encouraged them to continue their post-graduate studies. In addition, it informed the students of the ongoing research within the department which resulted in involving students in ongoing research and competitions.

One of the seminars delivered by a local architect was on the participation in architectural competitions. The seminar concluded with an invitation from the local architect to staff and students to collaborate with him in forming a design team to participate in an architectural competition for the architectural design of Tekirdag Metropolitan Municipality Building in Turkey and the urban design of its surroundings (Fig.2).

The number of students interested in participating in the competition was more than expected and a selection process was put in place for choosing the students who participated in the competition. The team was formed from two local architects, two faculty members, two teaching assistants and six final-year students. The entry was completed and submitted before the deadline and involved site visits, a variety of design activities and model-making. Although the entry did not win, all participants were satisfied with the work and agreed that the experience was both rewarding and enjoyable on many levels. One of the students continued to work with the competition's lead architect and they partnered to establish an architectural firm.

Community engagement activities

Higher education institutions play a key role in the process of social change and development. Thus, universities and the people working within them have a responsibility towards the local community by producing socially responsible graduates as well as fostering community engagement activities contributing to the development of society.[8] To achieve socially responsible graduates, higher education (HE) should not be only subject-centred, but society-centred because students' community engagement adds another dimension to HE rather than being limited to knowledge acquisition of a specific subject area. This engagement has a clear positive impact on the development of students' characters and their appreciation of a multitude of values within their societies, as well as identifying the importance of civic engagement through their architectural education. If the community engagement activity is linked to the students' subject area, it can encourage them to be lifelong learners who are capable of independent knowledge acquisition.

Two community engagement activities were organised and witnessed significant engagement from the students; the first was refurbishing a house for a family in need and the second was the façade design for a multi-storey residential complex. These two projects were excellent opportunities for engaging myself, the team of students and faculty in a complete practical teaching/learning experience tackling all stages of design from meeting the client to the execution stage, which also involved a number of informal assessments and critical feedback sessions.

The two projects gave the students an excellent opportunity to interact with real clients rather than imaginary ones. This process is missing in our 'curricular' activities.One of the main hurdles facing our graduates is their communication skills with clients. The closest they get to interviewing real clients is when members of the community are invited for studio-based critiques sessions or when the instructor plays the role of the client, which is not as effective as interacting with a real client. In most cases, the clients are 'virtual' and the students are asked to have an imaginary scenario about their clients.[9]

In the first project, after visiting the family's house and taking their permission to involve the students in refurbishing their house, a team was formed of a group of students, another faculty member and a teaching assistant to manage and execute the project. We visited the family house, interviewed the family members and recorded their requirements (Fig.3). Afterwards, the students made sketches and proposals for the refurbishment and presented it to the family, then the municipality representative to request funding for the project. This is a good example of how the university plays its civic role bringing together, students, staff, researchers and local authorities to give back to the local community through the shared expertise of the team. This example shows how the university has a strong community engagement and tries to dissolve the boundaries between the university and society.

Although the project did not secure funding for execution, it was a rewarding experience for all stakeholders involved. However, it should be noted that it might have been disappointing for the family that the project was not executed although it was explained that the project would be executed subject to the availability of funds, and they were understanding. One of the students described this experience as a life-changing experience since it introduced her to conditions which she thought did not exist. Another student said that it was an eye-opening experience as it introduced him to many human aspects which should drive any design. However, the conditions the students are referring to are relative and could be acceptable within other contexts.

Another similar team was formed for the second project. The team visited the site, received the drawings from the owner and started working on the facade design. In this project, two staff members participated as members of the team while the students took the leading role. The students were empowered to take informed decisions based on analysis and communication with the owner. Through this project, the students experienced a problem/outcome-based learning process which was a real one. Students learned a lot while solving the design problem which is an expected outcome of this approach; it also encourages their lifelong learning skills.[10]

The owner was pleased with the work (to the extent that he offered internship opportunities for the students in his contracting company which was constructing the project (Fig.4). The students described this experience as invaluable, and gave them an opportunity to apply what they have learned to real life. The owner described this experience as a win-win situation since he gave his time, and in return, he received alternative designs for his project. The project also impacted the academic staff members involved, as one of them proposed having similar activities as part of the curriculum and not just as ECA, which was considered one of the ways forward for developing the curriculum. Another aspect which benefited the university was the media coverage of the project which resulted in publicity which positively reflected on students' recruitment.

## Organising and participating in summer schools

International summer schools are great opportunities for students and staff to widen their networks of contacts and engage with other people from diverse backgrounds. Upon receiving an invitation to deliver a Keynote speech on renewable energy, technology and sustainability at the university of Lincoln's fifth International Summer School, the students showed interest in joining the summer school. Participating in the summer school required approvals from the department's executive team. They showed appreciation and understanding of the importance of participating in ECAs.[11] Accordingly, they provided all needed logistical and administrative support to ensure our successful participation in the summer school. Sharing this understanding of the civic role of the university among executives facilitates the work done by the staff members and contributes to sharing the message among students.

One particularly challenging aspect was the safety of the students travelling for the first time abroad and how to provide reassurance to their parents about their safety and the long-term benefits of engaging in this ECA. During the summer school, the students participated in activities related to sustainability ranging from visiting sustainable buildings, participating in building a house from straw bales, engaging in design projects with peers from other countries in addition to attending seminars, lectures and workshops. The impact of that summer school was immediately noticed in the improved performance of the students who attended. This example demonstrates how the learning objectives of some of the architecture related modules could be achieved through the informal settings of ECAs. It could be either a standalone pedagogy or integrated within the more structured curricular activities. It shows the important role and benefits of ECAs and the experience students gain during their years of study at university.

Students' feedback on attending the summer school was mostly focused on how it helped widen their network of contacts from different parts of the world and enjoying learning more about sustainable building design through hands-on experience in the workshops they participated in. According to the students, the most informative activity which added to their architectural-related knowledge in relation to sustainability was their visit to the Crystal Building in Greenwich (Fig.5).

*Figure 5*:
Students attending the University of Lincoln's fifth International Summer School after their visit to the Crystal in Greenwich (Islam Abohela 2015).

## Students' participation in conferences

Staff students' conferences are a good opportunity to encourage students to gain interest in research. Students attending scientific conferences with staff makes it easier for students to become familiar with conferences and consider a research-related career in the future. Participating in this ECA helped the students realise the importance of research, gain knowledge in fields they are interested in, link research to their curricula and gain more insights into topics related to their specialisations.[12] One of the main impacts as a result of attending conferences at early stages is that some students realise their interest in doing research in specific areas.

Upon announcing the presentation of two papers at a conference in Istanbul on film studies and cinematic arts, students showed interest in attending since they have previously attended seminars on the topics investigated in the two papers which focused on future cities and architecture in science fiction films.[13] A group of students attended the conference and one of them was interested in this research area; she regularly engaged in discussions on the topic and eventually registered for a Master's programme at one of the Turkish universities.

Another conference covered Bahraini women in Engineering, where architecture is considered a branch of engineering, which was organised by the Supreme Council for Women in Bahrain, the students were invited to attend with staff members, and they actively engaged in the sessions. The students were first-year students, and it was their first time attending a similar event. Encouraging them to participate in conferences at earlier stages made it easier, at a later stage for them, to present their research work at a conference organised by the university for undergraduate research. This experience gave them the confidence to join the organising committee for an international conference organised by the University one year later. The pedagogic benefit of this activity was demonstrated through the development of the students' communication skills. It reflected positively on the way in which they presented and defended their design projects. In addition, it was noticed that students who gained this experience tackled design problems with more depth and tried to implement the gained knowledge in their design projects.

### Conclusion

With current discussions on the results of the survey of the ARB proposal for modernising the initial education and training of architects in the UK, a short-term solution needs to be implemented until the complete reform by the ARB is announced and implemented.[14] The agreement on the needed development of the content of our courses in fire and life safety, climate emergency and sustainability, and technology was also confirmed in RIBA's Way Ahead report which proposed a framework for architectural education and professional development.[15] This report confirms a gap which is suggested to be filled swiftly by the ECAs similar to the ones discussed in this paper.

It could be argued that Architecture is civic by nature. Whatever the building typology is, it will be affected by and affecting its surroundings. Accordingly, it is important for schools of architecture to embed elements in their curricula which promotes their civic function. ECAs activities which can introduce activities integrating teaching, research and professional practice with community engagement, will offer opportunities for mutual benefits between the school of architecture and the society.

The film club, design and research seminars, community engagement activities, participating in international summer schools, academic conferences and more diverse ECAs could provide different platforms covering the areas which need more attention within our architectural educational models. The informal nature of ECAs encourages students' participation which is a common interest for HE educators.

The discussed activities presented the potential of ECAs as an effective pedagogy for a better architectural education experience. The pedagogical benefits of these activities are evident and were demonstrated through students' feedback and observed performance development. It also addresses the ARB/RIBA criteria and graduate attributes and contributes to the role of the civic university within society.

This informal pedagogy is complementary to the studio-based approach which could effectively engage a wider spectrum of students in knowledge acquisition. The impact on the formal educational model is indirect, but positive and effective. How students engage in ECAs can provide a strong foundation for developing architecture curricula to accommodate similar activities which might prove more effective than conventional ways of courses' delivery.

Through the reviewed cases of ECAs, it can be concluded that ECAs have the pedagogical potential to inform new approaches for architectural education through engaging students in diverse activities. A more formal investigation would be required to assess the effect ECAs have on students' architectural knowledge acquisition. Thus, the work introduced in this article is the starting point for a research project involving international partners investigating the use of ECAs as an effective method for architectural education worldwide.

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