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CHECKING-IN / Revising the Bachelor's Curriculum

Angelika Hinterbrandner, Steffen Hägele

The full-scale revision of the architectural curriculum of the bachelor program at the ETH Zurich Department of Architecture (D-ARCH) is advancing steadily, approaching the threshold of the next phase. (1) Representing the mandated, yet open departmental body of the Extended Teaching Commission, (2) we work along with more than 60 individuals who actively engaged in our workshops so far. We, the core team of the curriculum revision, share our insights into the comprehensive process half-way of its conception.

Propelling the department's strategy (3) as well as the rich proposals of various initiatives and groups, the Extended Teaching Commission body diligently worked on what is called «Rough Concept», the coarse outline of the future curriculum, set for voting in autumn. (4) The prime objective of the new curriculum is to nurture collaboration and seamlessly integrate varied, yet foundational architectural perspectives into the Bachelor's degree in architecture — simultaneously balancing out workload. A prevailing spirit within all parties involved in the process echoes the desire to amalgamate the broad range of knowledge and expertise present at D-ARCH. This aspiration manifests in several proposals for a jointly taught first year, namely based on multiple professors' collaboration. Involving at least two chairs, the proposal requires the establishment of a first-year assistant team without specific chair affiliation, bridging the expertise involved.

STRUCTURE: The program's architecture accentuates coherence, simplicity, and integration. Adapting to the new academic calendar, which will be introduced ETH-wide, the semester structure is recalibrated to aid students in managing their workload efficiently. There is a deliberate emphasis on rhythm to ensure well-defined breaks and transitions, all the while diminishing overall contact hours.

LEARNING: Enhanced teaching modalities and methods underpin the new learning experience in the bachelor's program. This includes integrating lectures and exercises in the inductive environment of the design studio, introducing entirely new teaching formats and tutorials that anchor competencies as well as cultivating a conducive academic atmosphere for both the faculty and the students.

ASSESSMENT: The new assessment framework prioritizes competencies over knowledge, transparency, and continuous

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feedback, sidestepping the conventional pitfalls of end-term failures. Individual module evaluations replace sweeping examinations, especially as certain subjects become part of the studio format. Crucially, an environment conducive to constructive failures ensures a safe learning environment and an evolutionary learning experience for students.

CONTENT: With a focus on core competencies such as an updated set of essential architectural design tools, the curriculum introduces students to the stance that «everything is design», therefore empowering them as active actors, while establishing the awareness of the architect's impact and responsibilities. It presents diverse perspectives, tools, and methods, highlighting critical thinking, sustainability, contextual awareness and interdisciplinary collaboration.

As students advance through the three-year program, topical red threads for each competency are designed to increase in complexity, fostering deeper understanding. The projects and exercises grow more multi-layered as collaborative formats are augmented in the second-year design studios. Connections to the practical world outside academia are strengthened by means of a coherent pedagogic embedding of the internship. The third year becomes a transitional period of increased student agency and self-selected specification, concluding with a thesis.

In conclusion, the revised curriculum seeks a thoughtful and comprehensive renewal of architectural education at D-ARCH. Strengthening architectural design by synergizing theory and practice, studio and course work, it aims to truly foster collaboration and create a supportive environment for students and staff. Through the integrative nature of the new curriculum, the program is designed to prepare graduates for a dynamic and multifaceted architectural practice. Students will get in touch with a variety of perspectives from the very beginning and will learn how to assess and navigate complexity.

We invite you to become part of this exciting endeavour of contributing to the future of architectural education. Help shape the departmental transformation and implementation of the new curriculum together with us and the entire school — beyond a great written document. Let's create a new curriculum that is alive.