





The MUDD program, UNSW: The centrality of transdisciplinary curricula in urban design studio (UDS): A phenomenographic exploration of factors impacting urban design studio curricula

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of teaching methods in urban design education within the context of Australia's postgraduate programs. Utilizing phenomenography—a qualitative research methodology grounded in educational science—it is organized into three main sections. The first section delves into the multifaceted drivers of curricular transformation in urban design, encompassing the effects of managerialism, the prevalence of neoliberal ideologies, and the persistent identity crisis facing the field. The second section presents a detailed case study of a particular graduate program, emphasizing its contribution to the discussion of theories of learning and teaching in urban design pedagogy. By analyzing the former Master of Urban Development and Design (MUDD) curriculum at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Sydney, the final section synthesizes the insights garnered from the structure of the MUDD program, proposing that these can inform refining and enhancing the quality of future Urban Design program models. The MUDD program exemplifies the adoption of transdisciplinary methods and teaching, learning and curricula theories in urban design education, while underscoring the urgent need for improved pedagogical training for faculty. This article not only documents these shifts but also serves as a time capsule, preserving the structure of a distinguished Urban Design curriculum during a tumultuous period in higher education worldwide. Our research identifies three key findings: first, Urban Design Studios (UDS) often operate in disciplinary silos that inhibit the integration of urban systems. Second, although there is some support for transdisciplinary methods, practitioners' understanding of UDS pedagogy remains limited. Third, there is a critical need for educational science training for higher education instructors within the Australian Higher Education Institutional context. These insights underscore the urgency of adopting transdisciplinary approaches in urban design education, with implications for policy development and enhanced educational outcomes within the Built Environment field.

Keywords: transdisciplinary, the master of urban development and design, urban design, education, design pedagogy

1. Introduction

This paper critically explores the evolution of curricula in postgraduate urban design education in Australia, highlighting significant gaps in the existing historical literature regarding educational curriculum models in this discipline, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Crosbie, 2020; Jayasuriya, 2020). It employs Phenomenography, a qualitative research method rooted in educational science, which emphasizes the variations in individuals' experiences and conceptualizations of phenomena (Marton, 2004). The discussion is structured into three primary sections: first, an examination of the underlying factors driving curricular changes; second, a case study of the Master of Urban Development and Design (MUDD) program, which exemplified a

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cohesively aligned transdisciplinary curricula approach; and, finally, a synthesis of insights aimed at informing potential enhancements for future urban design programs.

The pandemic has precipitated a transformative shift in higher education, revealing vulnerabilities in previously effective pedagogical frameworks for urban design education (Kanwar & Carr, 2020). Consequently, a marked loss of educators and program discontinuities has led to a critical ontological knowledge deficit in the field (Bare et al., 2021; Carnegie et al., 2022). With more than three decades of experience in this enduring urban design program, the authors have directly observed the evolution of its practices and impacts.

Despite a renewed interest in Urban Design curricula post-pandemic, the current spatiotemporal conditions mean there remains a notable lack of comprehensive studies on transdisciplinary Urban Design Studio curricula, especially those examined through the lens of educational science prior to the pandemic (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2022). This gap underscores the pressing need for scholarly investigation and intervention to equip future urban designers with the vital skills required to tackle contemporary urban challenges (Cuthbert, 2016; Yavuz Özgür & Çalışkan, 2025).

This study delves into the MUDD graduate program model at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), with a particular focus on studio-based experiential learning (Palazzo & Shirleyana, 2024; Thompson & Chapman, 2025). Utilizing Martonian (1997) phenomenography, we uncover oft-ignored dimensions of urban design education that are pertinent to current realities (Akten, 2023; Marton & Booth, 1997a, 1997b; Pinar, 2022). The challenges brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the analytical dualism of leadership and management in higher education institutions (HEIs), necessitate a critical reassessment of established educational theories in order to improve effective pedagogical practices (Kamalipour et al., 2023).

The significance of pedagogical curricula and the incorporation of learning, teaching and curricula theories, particularly Biggs' (1996) concepts of constructive alignment, creating an integrated curricular framework, require recognition and integration across all tiers of curriculum design within HEIs, including in urban design education (Biggs, 2014; Biggs & Tang, 2010; Fischer, 2025; Fox, 2019; Tepper, 2005). This integration spans from the macro level of policy formation, which seeks to eliminate redundancy in program offerings within institutions, to the meso-institutional level, where a transdisciplinary approach is essential for creating programs that are cohesively aligned. At the micro level, this alignment is critical in the daily formative and summative assessments within classrooms, underscoring the necessity for lectures, tutorials and design studios to be synchronized with instructors who are well-informed about the curricular content throughout the educational continuum (Barrett & Hordern, 2024; Denholm, 2023).

Consistent with these educational theories in the MUDD program, the founders had cultivated a cohesive and aligned curriculum (Cuthbert, 2023; Lang, 2006). This study chronicles the evolution of the MUDD graduate program and elucidates the institutional frameworks that shaped its approach to Urban Design education (Fischer, 2025; Weirick, 2015). Through a thorough literature review, alongside secondary source analysis and targeted interviews, we present a detailed narrative of the program's conceptual development.

Urban design continuities to grapple with an identity crisis while navigating its multifaceted dynamics, contested definitions, and varied pedagogical approaches (Burayidi, 2015). This complexity introduces numerous variables that must be thoughtfully considered, while the field's contested nature results in a range of approaches that complicate both study and practice (Cuthbert, 2001; Kamalipour et al., 2023). This situation reflects the fundamentally multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary character of urban design (Cuthbert, 2011; Cuthbert & Suartika, 2014; Lang, 2022).

To navigate these complexities effectively, foundational theories from educational science are crucial for guiding curriculum development and decision-making. A clear distinction among key terminologies is necessary. The term "MULTIDISCIPLINARY" refers to the simultaneous engagement of distinct disciplines, each maintaining its own boundaries while contributing unique methodologies and insights (Kaufman et al., 2003). Conversely, "INTERDISCIPLINARY" denotes a collaborative approach in which various disciplines integrate knowledge and techniques, resulting in a cohesive framework for understanding (Van den Besselaar & Heimeriks, 2001). Finally, "TRANSDISCIPLINARY" transcends traditional disciplinary limits to develop innovative frameworks and insights, often involving stakeholders beyond academic settings in addressing complex real-world challenges (Lawrence, 2010; Klein, 2008).

2. Approach and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative phenomenographic methodology explicitly rooted in the ontological, non-dualist, and second-order perspective of Martonian phenomenography. This approach incorporates phenomenography's epistemological stance of intentionality by incorporating Marton's (1997a) anatomy of experience framework and analyses the data using his (2004) five-step process for phenomenographic data analysis. Phenomenography's interpretivist paradigm emphasizes analyzing the subtle ways in which differing institutional arrangements across various professional practices and academic communities have significantly influenced MUDD outcomes (Marton, 2004).

To facilitate this exploration, a thorough literature review was conducted, drawing from a wide array of sources. This review encompassed the analysis of primary sources, including academic literature, which provided contemporary theoretical perspectives and empirical findings relevant to the topics under consideration. It also included secondary sources, including course handbooks and outlines, marketing materials and MUDD yearbooks (UNSW, 2016, 2019, 2020a) which offered insights into student life and cultural dynamics across various periods, highlighting significant events and social interactions. Additionally, program reviews were evaluated to assess the effectiveness and relevance of academic and extracurricular programs over time (Weirick, 2015).

In addition, strategically conducted phenomenographic interviews with eighteen urban design studio educators from Australia, the US and the UK, who possess firsthand knowledge and experiences related to the events, enhance the exploration of diverse viewpoints. The qualitative data gathered were systematically analyzed and categorized into four thematic areas: 1) Defining Urban Design, 2) The Role of Urban Design Studio in the Urban Design Curriculum, 3) The Impacts of Urban Design Studio on the Urban Design Curriculum, and 4) The Implications of these Impacts. This structured thematic analysis culminated in the construction of an outcome space that reflects the interrelationships among the identified categories, encapsulating the evolution of the identified themes and insights, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (Martin, 1997a; Martin, 1997b).

3. The Urban Design Identity Crisis

Urban design is a discipline that embodies a dynamic and contested character, resulting in a complex analytical duality. This duality is evident both as an academic field of study within higher education institutions and as a professional practice in the industry (Schurch, 1999). This complexity arises from the multifaceted definitions, roles, and pedagogical approaches that encapsulate urban design (Burayidi, 2015). Such contention has given rise to a variety of methodologies within the field (Kamalipour et al., 2023). The inherently multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary attributes of urban design education contribute to its continuous integration into broader curricula, which include architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning issues (Anacker, 2023; Bakir & Alsaadani, 2022; Inam, 2011). However, as noted by Cuthbert (2023), there is a concern that incorporating the principles of architecture or planning into urban design may overlook the unique needs and characteristics of urban environments. He suggests that each

discipline has its own strengths and should coexist, rather than one attempting to dominate the others, and that “[e]fforts to colonize Urban Design by architecture or planning are misplaced” (p. 13).

Navigating the academic pathways associated with urban design education can present considerable challenges for educators and students, particularly given the complexities of urban development, leading Carmona (2014) to refer to Urban Design as a mongrel discipline (Cuthbert, 2008; Kamalipour et al., 2023). The nomenclature of the MUDD program reinforced its primary emphasis on urban design, which contrasts with the focus observed in Anglophone contexts of the time. In this context, there had been a noticeable shift in planning education toward a "social science" approach (Peker, 2025; Yavuz Özgür & Çalışkan, 2025).

However, this shift often overlooks the practical realities of the physicality of the built environment, leading to a divergence between pedagogical models and the expectations set by these approaches (Fischer, 2025; Lang, 1983). A persistent viewpoint within the discipline posits that urban design curricula tend to disproportionately underemphasize critical fields such as economics, sociology, law, public policy, and statistical analysis, thereby neglecting the essential transdisciplinary aspects vital for a holistic understanding of urban challenges (Yavuz Özgür, 2025).

The discourse on urban design education would benefit from a thorough examination of co-design processes that prioritize inclusivity and engage diverse stakeholders. By incorporating tacit knowledge from other place-makers, educators can enhance the pedagogical framework, acknowledging the experiences of those who interact with urban spaces (Zhang et al., 2025). This co-design approach enriches educational content and fosters collaboration between theory and practice. It promotes a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics shaping urban environments and underscores the significance of participatory methodologies in urban planning and design, aligning with the view of urban design as a socially embedded practice that transcends technical expertise (Nelischer & Kickert, 2025).

4. MUDD Program: Transdisciplinary Collaboration in Urban Design Education

The MUDD program at UNSW was established in the mid-1990s, a period during which urban landscapes were increasingly characterized by significant challenges associated with rapid urbanization and the intricacies of late capitalist frameworks (Bell, 1997). Its inception was spearheaded by a coalition of leading academics who identified the pressing need for a transdisciplinary approach to urban development. This need was particularly evident given the accelerating global urbanization trends, which necessitated innovative pedagogical frameworks (Fischer, 2025).

The MUDD program was developed within the former Graduate School of the Built Environment (GSBE) in the then Faculty of Architecture, developed to foster interdisciplinary postgraduate coursework and research degrees. Having failed to fully achieve its goals, Dr Bruce Judd was appointed a new Coordinator (and later as Head of School) to develop a suite of programs including urban design, sustainable development, heritage conservation, and facilities management. He sought the support of distinguished Professors and Heads of School in Architecture (Jon Lang and Paul Reid), Planning (Alexander Cuthbert) and Landscape Architecture (James Weirick) and invited them to form a group to develop the master’s degree in urban design. The group was later joined by a Visiting Fellow in the School of Building, specializing in property development, providing input on the complex interplay between design, policy, and property market forces (Fischer, 2025; Weirick, 2015).

The MUDD program distinguished itself by synthesizing traditional course offerings into a cohesive academic journey that directly responded to the nuanced challenges of contemporary city-making in a globalized context (Weirick, 2015). Collaborative endeavors, including transdisciplinary workshops, served to unite students in the collective examination of complex

urban issues, reflecting an understanding of the necessity of cross-disciplinary engagement in tackling such challenges (Weirick, 2015).

The original team behind the MUDD program identified significant shortcomings in traditional urban design paradigms, positioning the program as a vital platform for both inquiry and practical application (Cuthbert, 1994; Lang, 1983). Ongoing contributions from industry professionals and visiting scholars ensured that the curriculum remained responsive to the rapidly evolving landscape of urban development (UNSW, 2016, 2019, 2020b). Ultimately, the MUDD program represented a collective aspiration to redefine urban design as a critical aspect of urban development discourse, aiming to educate future leaders equipped to engage with the complexities of urbanization, capital dynamics, and public policy (Washburn, 2013).

4.1. MUDD Program Institutional Structure

When analyzing the MUDD program's position within academic institutions, it is essential to examine the specific nuances of institutional identity related to urban design programs. The MUDD program at the University of New South Wales was positioned within the former Graduate School of the Built Environment, an integral component of the then Faculty of Architecture. This deliberate placement within a transdisciplinary context—comprising Architecture, Planning, Landscape Architecture, and Building—facilitated a robust synthesis of diverse academic disciplines. Furthermore, the structure was later redefined, consolidating the various schools as Programs along with MUDD within a unified Faculty and School of the Built Environment.

The MUDD program aimed to integrate urban design within a broader context by recognizing its relationship with other built environment disciplines—making it an intellectually distinct yet integrative field. This positioning reflects variations in the institutional identity of urban design programs across different universities. While some programs may be more closely tied to architecture or planning departments, leading to a focus on aesthetic or regulatory aspects, others, such as MUDD, sought to transcend traditional boundaries by engaging with the more complex economic, social, and policy dimensions of urban development. This differentiation emphasizes the extensive impact of urban design and its essential role as a discipline that can effectively tackle the complexities of urban environments (Fischer, 2025).

4.1.1. MUDD Curriculum Overview (1995-2020)

The curriculum of MUDD encompassed various knowledge areas, enriched by the Harvard model, incorporating architecture, landscape architecture and planning, along with distinct domains and subdomains, which included several specializations and sub-specializations (Lang, 1981). The curriculum of the MUDD program was transdisciplinary, drawing upon three primary bodies of knowledge:

Spatial Political Economy: This domain focused on understanding how global capital formation, investment, and disinvestment manifest in urban forms and structures.

Urban Design Principles and Paradigms: This area encompassed normative models of urban design that emphasize aesthetic, social, and environmental considerations, examining what constitutes 'good city form'.

Urban Design as Public Policy: This subdomain explored the relationship between public policy and urban design, including how design principles intersect with the interests of the property sector and the public realm.

Each of these areas could be further refined into sub-specializations, allowing students to tailor their studies to their interests and the specific challenges they wish to address in urban development. In the first semester, students had the flexibility to select one elective 6 UOC (Units of Credit) course from a range of relevant disciplines offered by the Faculty of Built Environment (FBE) graduate programs or, with approval, from other Faculties (Weirick, 2015).

4.2. MUDD Program: Emerging Themes

The MUDD program's thematic problem areas were centered on addressing two significant global challenges: rapid urbanization and the implications of urban projects within the framework of late capitalism. As cities grow at unprecedented rates, MUDD examined how urban design and development could address issues such as housing affordability, sustainable development, environmental stress, and social inequities (Espinoza, 2022). Additionally, the program emphasized the importance of engaging with critical urban issues encountered in cities across five continents. By utilizing Sydney as a case study, the program grappled with local urban challenges while maintaining an international perspective, focused initially on the rapidly urbanizing East Asian region. This dual focus enabled students to develop solutions that are not only contextually relevant but also informed by global trends and practices in urban development within a living, breathing city.

4.2.1. Principles of the MUDD Degree

Since its inception in the 1990s, the MUDD Program evolved under guiding principles aimed at fostering an intensive and immersive educational experience. Spanning two semesters and a Summer Term, the original 120 UOC program was designed to be completed within a single calendar year, encouraging students to engage fully in a vigorous 'Graduate School' environment. While the program initially supported only full-time enrolment to encourage an intense commitment, part-time study options were later made available to better accommodate local students from practice, thus maintaining a commitment to a vibrant Studio culture.

The program also transitioned through two changes in University UOC policy. The initial program required completion of 120 UOC with Design Studios increasing from 20 UOC in Session 1 to 30 UOC in Session 2 culminating with a 40 UOC International Design Studio in the Summer Term reflecting the increase in complexity of projects. Accompanying 10 UOC lecture courses were offered in Session 1 (History of Urban Development, Urban and Environmental Law, and Real Estate Development) and Session 2 (Critical Urban Theory and Urban Landscape) along with a 20 UOC Case Studies course in Summer Term. A 10 UOC Elective was required in Sessions 1 and 2. Soon after a change in University policy set a total UOC requirement of 24 per Session and 72 overall.

In 2003, Design Studio UOC was reduced from 12 to 9 UOC for Session 1 and remained at 12 UOC for Session 2 and the Summer Term. Lecture courses were therefore set at 3 UOC each and elective at 6 UOC each. A new 6 UOC course 'Communication in Urban Design' was added to the Summer Term Program. This involved design, editing and production of a high-quality annual yearbook on the MUDD program's outcomes. In 2006 a further University edict required a minimum of 6 UOC for lecture courses. To achieve this, all Design Studio courses became 12 UOC, Session 1 lecture courses were consolidated into one 6 UOC History and Theory of Urban Development and Design, Session 2 courses into 6 UOC Theory of Urban Development and 6 UOC Planning, and Urban Development and Summer Term courses into 6 UOC each. One elective was retained at 6 UOC. Thus, the idealistic content of the lecture courses was compressed and the progressive increase in Design Studios abandoned, diluting to some degree the intention and scope of the program (Weirick, 2015).

Despite these institutional changes, the MUDD Program prided itself on the involvement of both senior academic staff and experienced practitioners as instructors, ensuring that students received high-calibre guidance. Unlike many other urban design programs, it welcomed a diverse cohort of students from around the globe, including professionals with backgrounds in architecture, landscape architecture, planning, engineering, property development, and more. By embracing students from a variety of disciplines, the program enriched the learning experience through a transdisciplinary approach despite institutional constraints (Cuthbert, 2007; Lang, 1994).

4.3. The Educational Experience in the MUDD Urban Design Program

The suite of Design Studios was fundamentally supported by a series of theory courses that examined significant themes such as spatial political economy, urban history, urban design theory, planning and development, property development, urban landscape design, heritage conservation, and the practicalities of urban design implementation, which were assessed through a comprehensive case study course.

MUDD's curriculum was built upon the foundational theories established by its founders. Lang's extensive academic contributions had notably enriched this curriculum, especially through his paradigm-based approaches, as showcased in his work, "Urban Design: A Typology of Procedures and Products" (Lang, 2006). Since the early 1980s, Lang has also championed integrating studio and workshop experiences into the education of planning students (Lang, 1981; 1983). Cuthbert's writings from 2003 to 2011 offer a critical perspective on spatial political economy, which is crucial for analyzing urban dynamics (Cuthbert, 2003; 2011; 2008). Furthermore, Fraker's (2007) concept of "Forcefields" provided an insightful framework for understanding urban design. Together, these theories and frameworks profoundly influenced the educational structure of the MUDD Urban Design Studio.

By concentrating on specific design elements and methodologies, students improved their understanding and capability to navigate the diverse challenges inherent in urban settings. The studio courses encompassed a wide array of design typologies, including residential, commercial, mixed-use, and public spaces, allowing students to engage with various urban scenarios and scales.

Distinct categories emerged within the studio work based on project focus. For example, some studios prioritized sustainable design practices, encouraging the exploration of typologies that promote eco-friendliness and resilience in urban contexts. Others concentrated on socio-spatial equity, prompting students to address the typological challenges present in informal settlements or areas experiencing gentrification. Overall, the diverse theories, categories, and typologies fostered critical thinking and creativity, empowering students to view urban design not merely as a technical endeavor but as a civic responsibility that necessitates careful consideration of the social, economic, and environmental implications of their design choices.

4.3.1. MUDD Design Studio Focus

Grounded in theories of spatial political economy and normative ideals of urban design, the Design Studio curriculum addressed urban growth and change, particularly in the dynamic East-Asia region. Sydney served as a living laboratory for students, facilitating a deeper understanding of urban development processes within a transparent political framework. The program's studio structure was intentionally developmental, increasing project complexity from the first to the third semester.

'The goal of the studio sequence "UDS sequence in UD curricula" is to enable students to develop their ability to design decision processes and policies and products to meet specified ends. There is no substitute for learning-by-doing, problem-solving experience in the studio.' Jon Lang (1981) co-founder of MUDD.

Design Studio formed the heart of the curriculum, constituting 50% of the overall program. A pivotal experience was the International Urban Design Studio, a compulsory core component that occurred each Summer Term. This collaboration with an overseas university, city planning agency, or consulting firm allowed students to immerse themselves in the urban dynamics of a different culture and apply their design skills in real-world contexts.

Each year, the work produced in the Studios culminated in a professional-quality yearbook and exhibition that highlighted student achievements and showcased their projects. The program maintained a fixed student-to-staff ratio of 1:15 to promote an intimate, Masterclass form of learning environment, while this ratio was ultimately determined by faculty policy regarding studio

instruction. Efforts were made to attract a diverse cohort in terms of gender, country of origin, and discipline, thereby fostering a rich tapestry of perspectives.

Admission to the program was contingent upon the successful completion of a four-year undergraduate degree in a relevant field, achieving a minimum Credit average. The MUDD Program emphasized group collaboration, which comprised approximately 60% of the curriculum. This focus reflects the collaborative nature of urban design, allowing students from non-design backgrounds to contribute their skills and participate meaningfully in the Design Studio process.

The sequence of the Urban Design Studio was systematically structured to align with the curriculum, starting with fundamental principles of urban design and advancing to intricate examinations of urban design as an element of public policy. Core skills were further developed in the second Urban Design Studio course, which delved into planning policies, project feasibility, and the formulation of urban design guidelines. The summer course, International Urban Design Studio, involved a two-week international field trip, allowing students to quickly apply their design knowledge and skills in a different cultural context.

The following figures illustrate the thematic frameworks of the Design Studios and showcase examples of student work from the MUDD24 academic year, covering 2018 to 2019 (UNSW, 2019). Figures 1 to highlight archetypal projects from students engaged in these studios (UNSW, 2020 a, b).

Figure 1 depicts student work from Studio 1, which utilized narratives drawn from film and cinema to deepen students' understanding of urban history, identity, and lived experiences. This methodology ensured that design proposals were both contextually relevant and accurately reflective of the specific urban environments being explored.

"The cinematic arts have a natural kinship with urban design. Film's immediacy in relating characters to urban space makes it undoubtedly an urban design-related media."
— Pizarro, R.E., 2011.

SEMESTER 2: The City and Cinematic Space

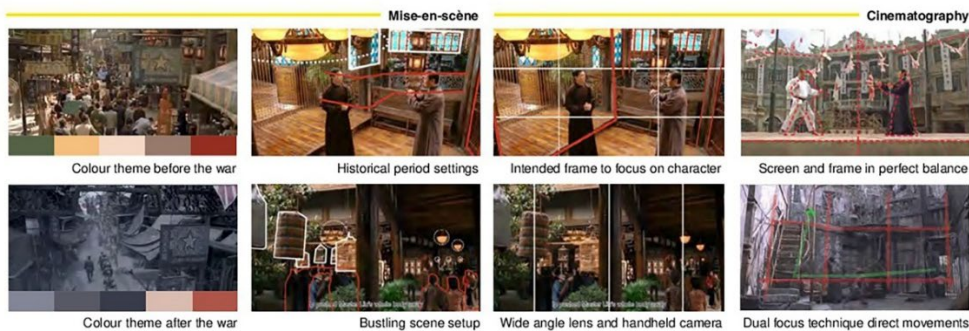
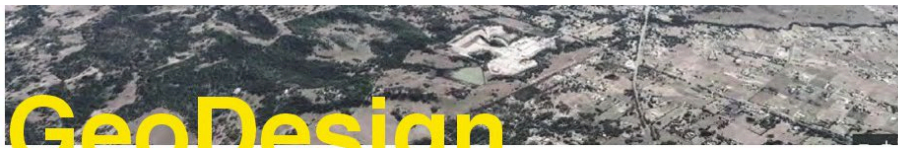
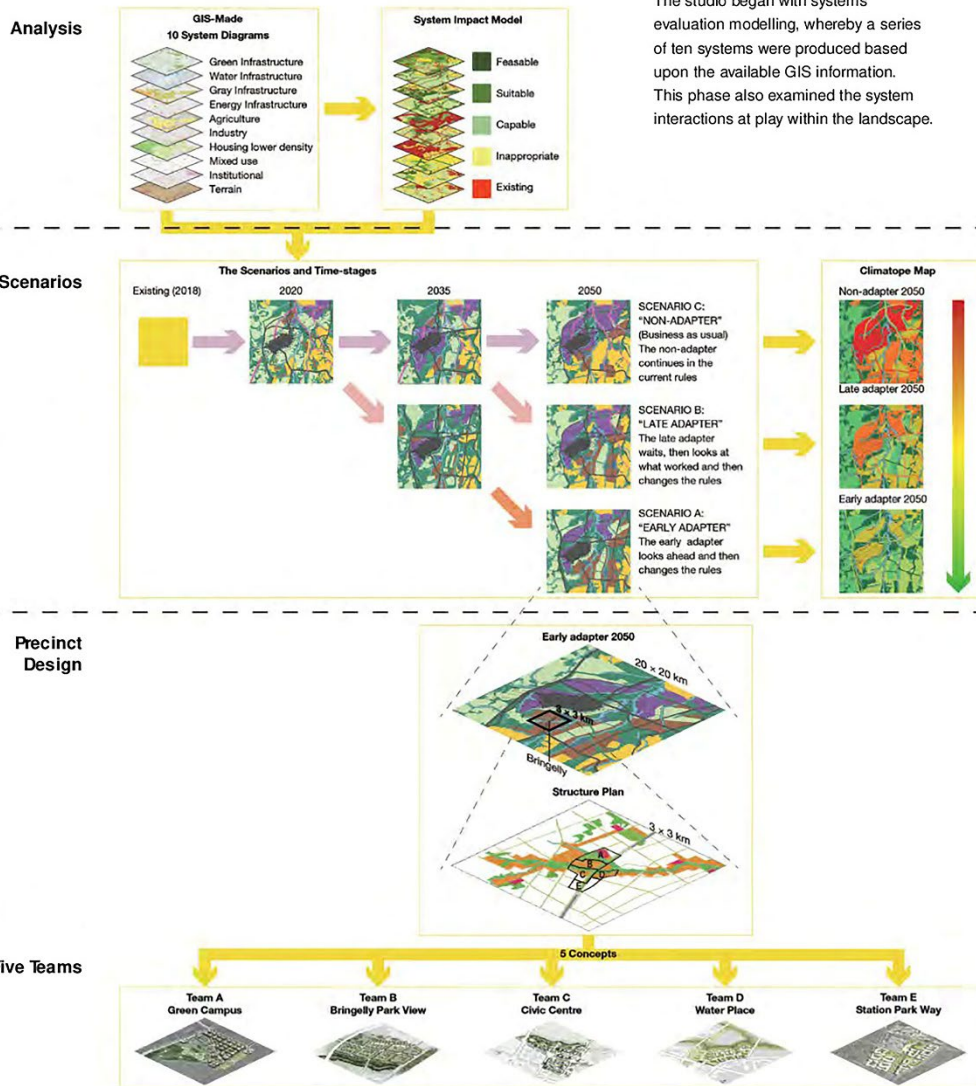


Figure 1 Semester 1 studio 1 MUDD24-the city and cinematic space-Ip Man (2008)-MUDD students 2018-19, pg. 42

In Figure 2, students from Studio 2 focused their attention on a specific site in Sydney. Collaborating with Carl Steinitz from the Harvard Urban Design School and University College London, MUDD students applied his modelling evaluation techniques to develop 'change models' for the Western Sydney Airport (Pettit et al., 2019; UNSW, 2019).

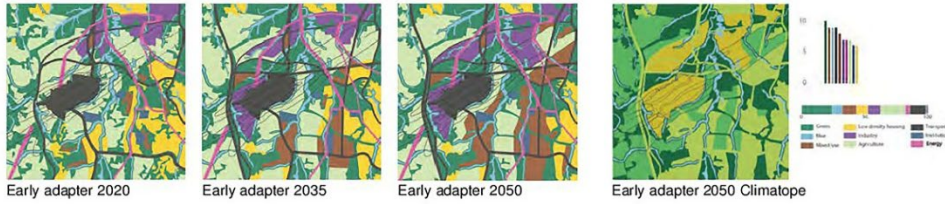


GeoDesign Western Sydney Airport



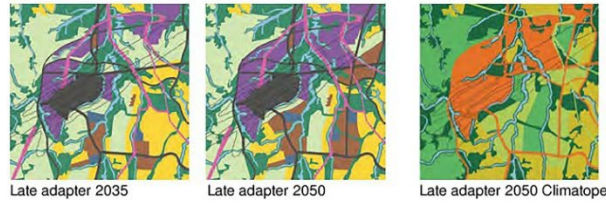
Early Adapter

Scenario - The early adapter looks ahead and then changes the rules.



Late Adapter

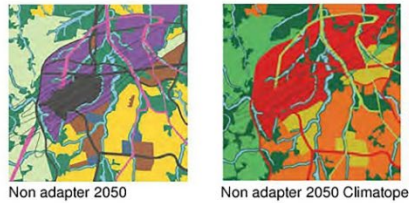
Scenario - The late adapter waits, then assesses what has worked, and then changes the rules.



Non Adapter

Scenario - The non-adapter continues upon the current set of policies and rules.

Based upon the ten systems mapped, students developed a range of scenarios using what Steinitz (2012) labels 'change models'. A change model provokes questions such as, "how might an area be alerted?"; or "how might it systematically change?". This process was informed by a range of current government policy documents and professional best practices.



Different scenarios were outlined, for example where mixed-use development was within a certain proximity to transit nodes, and riparian corridors were widened along creek corridors testing the implication of these decisions upon the urban microclimate of the locality, the climatic performance of the city and the overall ecological footprint. As such, three scenarios were developed in relation to questions surrounding climate change: Early Adapter, Late Adapter and Non Adapter.

Subsequently at a 20km x 20km scale, students engaged with a top-down approach to environmental strategic planning in order to understand how cities are shaped at large metropolitan scales. Working imaginatively at such a broad scale is challenging, but to be innovative at smaller scales it is important to have experience working and linking to this larger regional scale.

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Figure 2 Semester 2 studio 2-MUDD24-Sydney studio-Geodesign Western Sydney Airport pages 71-72

Figure 3 showcases examples of student work from the International Design Studio 3, completed during the 2015-2016 academic year, which embarked on visits to Chicago and Berlin. The Chicago studio, hosted by the global design firm Skidmore Owings and Merrill, focused on the pressing issues of social and economic segregation in the city. The studio examined sites under consideration by the Obama Foundation, which were controversially situated in the city's prominent parks—Jackson Park and Washington Park—originally designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1871 (UNSW, 2016).

Throughout its 26-year history, the studio has explored over 54 cities worldwide, producing more than 408 Urban Design Case Studies from 1995 to 2020. Its primary objective has been to engage with global patterns critically and creatively.

Obama Presidential Center, Chicago Garfield Boulevard, Washington Park

Michele Apricia + Ju Xizhe + Li Han + Wan Li + Wang Mengya

The vision is to create an integrated web of buildings that defines the surrounding streets and draws in the landscape qualities of the park in a flowing series of green courtyards. The Obama Presidential Center will have a strong urban presence on Martin Luther King Drive and Garfield Boulevard, developed as an urban complex integrated with the Garfield 'L' Station on the Green Line. Interwoven with retail and commercial uses, the complex will be built to the street edge, scaled to the height of the adjoining Edmund Burke Elementary School. Thus, it will create continuous urban fabric in scale with surviving elements of the neighborhood. Instead of placing the Obama Presidential Center within Washington Park, as the official site proposes, the landscape qualities of Washington Park will be brought into the complex as a series of inter-related courtyards within the city block linking the

library, museum and community outreach components of the OPC. The arts incubator established by Theaster Gates on Garfield Boulevard will be supported as a local and global generator of urban activity. Educational initiatives will extend OPC outreach from neighborhood schools to vocational training centers and start-up businesses. The mixed-use complex will be complemented by infill housing within the grid structure of the neighborhood. East-west light rail extending from Midway Airport will pass the OPC on Garfield Boulevard and the Du Sable Museum of African American History across Washington Park to the University of Chicago campus. Initial design studies for this and the 51st Street site were undertaken in association with Lotta Larsson on exchange from Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg, Sweden.



Figure 3 Summer semester studio 3-MUDD21-international studio-Chicago-MUDD student work 2015-2016 folio MUDD 21 city visions 11 pg. 80-81

Figure 4 illustrates the activities associated with the “Communication in Urban Design Studio” Course. Recognizing the need to enhance students' graphic communication skills, this led to the introduction of the additional coursework subject, "Communication in Urban Design." This development significantly improved students' competencies in editing, graphic design, exhibition planning, and event coordination—essential skills for studio practice in urban design. Each year, students had the opportunity to consolidate their learning by presenting their projects during a major exhibition and at the yearbook launch, highlighting the importance of effective communication in conveying design concepts and engaging with the community. This integration of practical skills within the studio environment effectively prepared MUDD students for success as future urban design practitioners (UNSW, 2016).



Figure 4 Summer semester-communications studio-MUDD24-MUDD students working on the exhibition, folio and event-(UNSW, 2016) pg. 81

The MUDD program has demonstrated its impact through the achievements of its alumni. For example, Sibrani Sofian, with URBAN+, has led innovative projects like the development of Jakarta's new capital, Nusantara, located in East Kalimantan, Borneo, Indonesia, showcasing the program's integration of theory and practice (Sofian, 2025). Another graduate, Zhizhe Yu from AI.SpaceFactory has contributed to significant developments such as the PingAn Finance Center, Shenzhen, China. Alumni frequently highlight the program's focus on real-world problem-solving and collaboration, underscoring its role in preparing adept urban practitioners for contemporary challenges (Yu, 2020).

5. Findings

5.1. Positioning the Principles of the MUDD Program in Educational Science

In the exploration of urban design education, it is paramount to ground our findings within a comprehensive framework that articulates both pedagogical intent and practical application. As such, Tables 1 and 2 serve as critical empirical reflections of the educational strategies employed in the MUDD program, illustrating the theoretical underpinnings that guided its curriculum development. These tables encapsulate the synthesis of learning and teaching theories that inform our robust instructional methodologies, illustrating how effective educational practices were intricately woven into the structural fabric of the MUDD degree.

Priestley and Minty (2013) posits that curriculum-making, conceived as a social practice, mandates that educators within Higher Education Institutions be afforded a degree of teacher agency. This agency empowers educators to engage in meaningful deliberation regarding the selection of knowledge and content that aligns with the curriculum's overarching objectives. Moreover, curriculum-making requires rigorous critical reflection upon pedagogical methodologies—analyses of the approaches that drive our educational processes and shape the intellectual development of learners. It also necessitates the strategic structuring of assessment opportunities for students and the thoughtful organization of knowledge to enhance effective learning outcomes.

In investigating the educational framework of the MUDD program, we present two key tables that outline its pedagogical strategies. Table 1 offers a survey of various pedagogical models that are foundational to the MUDD curriculum. Each of these models has been selected based on empirical research demonstrating its effectiveness in developing critical competencies, such as critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration among students. The MUDD program included immersive methodologies, like Studio-Based Learning, and experiential approaches, such as Field Studies, signifying a thoughtful alignment with established educational theories. This alignment aimed to enhance the relevance of urban design education while actively engaging students in practices that reflected current trends in the field.

Table 2 further examines specific interventions and instructional practices integral to the MUDD program. This analysis clarifies how the previously mentioned theoretical frameworks were operationalized within the curriculum, providing concrete examples of evidence-based pedagogies in practice. By employing this analytical perspective, we assess the educational methodologies utilized in the MUDD program, emphasizing its commitment to fostering a transformative learning experience that was both innovative and grounded in empirical evidence. Together, these tables shed light on the program's efforts to cultivate an educational environment that equipped students to navigate the complexities inherent in urban design.

Table 1 Outline of Pedagogical Learning and Teaching Theories in the MUDD Program

Learning and Teaching Models:	Description:	Implementation:
Studio-Based Learning: (Schön, 1985)	Central to MUDD's approach, this model involves immersive, hands-on learning experiences in which students engage in real-world projects and case studies.	Students work in design studios to develop urban design solutions, receive peer and instructor feedback, and iterate on their designs.
Project-Based Learning (PBL): (Dutton, 1987)	PBL involves students tackling complex, real-world problems over an extended period, fostering collaboration and critical thinking.	Assign projects that require students to propose urban design solutions to actual community needs, involving local stakeholders for insights.
Interdisciplinary Collaboration: (Klein, 2008)	Encouraging students to work alongside peers from different disciplines (architecture, city	Establish joint projects or courses where students from various programs collaborate on urban

	planning, landscape architecture) reflects MUDD's transdisciplinary approach.	design challenges, promoting a comprehensive view of urban environments.
Field Studies and Site Visits: (Yusoff et al., 2019)	Site visits to urban spaces allow students to analyse existing conditions and understand the context of urban design.	Schedule regular field trips to diverse urban areas, encouraging students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world observations.
Experiential Learning: (Kolb, 2014)	This approach emphasises learning through experience, allowing students to engage with real environments and situations.	Incorporate internships or cooperative education opportunities in urban design firms or city planning departments to provide practical exposure.
Collaborative Learning: (Lew et al., 1986)	This theory highlights the importance of social interaction and collaboration in the learning process.	Implement group projects where students work in diverse teams to solve urban design challenges, promoting peer-to-peer feedback and shared learning experiences.
Place-Based Education: (Gruenewald & Smith, 2014)	This method focuses on the local community and environment, enhancing the relevance of learning through direct engagement with local issues and contexts.	Encourage students to investigate local urban issues, creating projects that address community-specific challenges, enhancing their sense of ownership and relevance.
Critical Pedagogy: (Ayoub Mahmoudi et al., 2014)	This approach encourages students to critique existing societal structures and consider how design can impact social justice and equity in urban settings.	Foster discussions and workshops around the ethical impacts of urban design, urging students to challenge norms and propose innovative, equitable solutions for communities.
Reflective Practice: (Schön, 1983)	This theory emphasises the importance of reflection in learning, helping students to critically analyse their experiences and improve their future practice.	Incorporate reflective journals or portfolio reviews where students document their processes, decisions, and lessons learned throughout the design studio projects.

Source: Original table created by the author, Lawton, J. (2025), for this paper.

Table 2 Outline of Pedagogical Curriculum Theories in the MUDD Program

Curriculum Models:	Description:	Implementation:
Constructive Alignment: (Biggs, 1996)	Constructive Alignment is an educational framework that aligns learning activities and assessments with learning outcomes. It promotes curriculum design where all elements work together to achieve desired objectives. In urban design, this model emphasises integrating essential competencies and skills, ensuring teaching methods and assessments are designed to create meaningful learning experiences.	To implement Constructive Alignment in urban design studios, educators should define clear, measurable learning outcomes that reflect the required competencies. Engaging teaching strategies like collaborative projects, real-world case studies, and interactive workshops can be used. Assessments should evaluate these outcomes through portfolios, presentations, and design critiques, ensuring that all curriculum elements align and are scaffolded with educational goals for a cohesive learning environment.

Integrated Curriculum Design: (Beane, 1997)	This model integrates various subjects such as ecology, sociology, and economics within urban design courses.	Develop a curriculum incorporating lessons from these fields into urban design projects, emphasising the interconnectedness of urban issues.
Community Engagement Framework: (Vance-Chalcraft et al., 2024)	This model emphasises working with communities to co-create urban design solutions.	Include service-learning components where students engage with local communities, applying their design skills to address real societal challenges.
Adaptive Learning Modules: (Bernard et al., 2019)	A flexible curriculum allows students to pursue themes or projects that interest them while covering core urban design principles.	Provide a range of elective courses that students can choose based on their specific interests in urban design, fostering personalised learning.
Capstone Projects: (Farrell et al., 2012)	This is a culmination of students' learning, where they can showcase their knowledge and skills in a significant project.	In the final year, students could work on a comprehensive urban design project that addresses a current urban challenge, presenting their proposals to a panel of industry professionals.
Biesta's Holistic Model of Curriculum Design: (Biesta, 2015)	This model advocates for an interdisciplinary curriculum that incorporates elements of cultural studies, environmental science, and participatory design into urban design education.	Integrate cultural awareness sessions that help students understand diverse community perspectives and values, facilitating inclusive urban design practices.
Priestley's Framework for Curriculum Innovations: (Priestley & Minty, 2013)	This framework focuses on the dynamics of curriculum change and the importance of teacher agency in implementing reforms.	Encourage faculty to adapt urban design courses based on emerging urban issues, fostering an environment where educators can exercise their creativity and expertise in shaping the curriculum.
Thijs and van Akker's Curriculum Design Model: (Thijs & Van Den Akker, 2009)	This model emphasises the interplay between educational theory, context, and practice, advocating for flexible and context-sensitive curriculum development.	Design urban design courses that reflect local challenges and opportunities, allowing students to engage with issues pertinent to their specific urban contexts.
Shiro's Critical Pedagogy Framework: (Schiro, 2012)	This theory promotes social justice through education and emphasises the role of critical reflection in the learning process.	Incorporate critical reflection exercises that challenge students to consider the ethical implications of their urban design decisions and advocate for equitable solutions.
Olm's Experiential and Reflective Learning Theory: (Carvalho et al., 2021)	This model highlights the importance of experiential learning combined with structured reflection to deepen understanding and skill acquisition.	Implement reflective journals or group discussions after fieldwork or design projects, encouraging students to critically analyse their experiences and learnings within urban design contexts.

Source: Original table created by the author, Lawton, J. (2025), for this paper.

The integration of diverse theoretical frameworks into the urban design curriculum, as detailed in Tables 1 and 2, fostered a dynamic learning environment that significantly enhances students' comprehension and practical skills in urban design, particularly in real-world situations.

Recent research indicates a notable increase in the demand for education-focused and sessional teaching positions relative to traditional academic roles (Marshall, 2012; McComb & Eather, 2023). Individuals occupying these positions often possess professional or academic credentials, however,

they frequently lack the critical competencies necessary for effective pedagogy. Many early-career instructors transition from corporate environments, where their responsibilities predominantly involve the implementation of directives rather than the management of projects. This assumption that such professionals or academics inherently possess the requisite skills for pedagogical practice is fundamentally flawed. Expecting them to transfer all essential teaching competencies without targeted training and support is unrealistic.

6. Conclusion

The MUDD program was disestablished as a separate master's program, and its courses were integrated as specializations within a generalized Master of City Planning program. This change will be the focus of another academic paper. In light of the dissolution of the MUDD program, it is essential to recognize both the advantages it provided and the lessons learned by course designers during its implementation. One notable observation is the ongoing challenges related to time allocation within the curriculum framework. These challenges persist regardless of whether the courses are offered in full or as plug-in modules. Despite concerted efforts to address these issues, a recurring conflict arises over the balance of essential skills that students are expected to acquire.

This conflict often results in overlooking the primary objective: enhancing students' urban "design" capabilities. The aim should be to empower students to critically assess design solutions, enabling them to discern between effective and ineffective outcomes, regardless of their future professional contexts. As we reflect on the MUDD experience, it is crucial to re-evaluate curriculum structures to prioritize comprehensive design solutions, thereby cultivating a more robust skill set among aspiring urban designers. Such enhancements would ensure that students are not only technically and theoretically proficient but also skilled in making informed design decisions throughout their careers.

The pedagogical ethos supporting the MUDD degree, underpinned by Educational Science, necessitates thorough analysis and reflection, especially in a world facing the urgent challenges of urbanization and social inequality. The integration of various pedagogical models, as outlined in [Tables 1 and 2](#), is not simply an academic choice but rather an essential response to the complexities of an evolving urban landscape. The MUDD approach highlights a deep awareness of the ethical responsibilities inherent in the field of urban design.

While the incorporation of immersive methodologies such as Studio-Based Learning and Field Studies accentuates experiential knowledge, it simultaneously raises critical questions about the adequacy of traditional educational paradigms to equip students for the multifaceted socio-political realities they will inevitably encounter. Thus, the MUDD program's commitment to fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and place-based education was pivotal in producing graduates who do not shy away from grappling with the underlying forces of inequality and injustice that permeate urban environments.

Additionally, the emphasis on reflective practice within the curriculum challenged students to not only engage with their immediate design responsibilities but also critically assess the broader implications of their work. In an era marked by systemic injustices, the MUDD program was committed to ensure that its graduates were not only technically proficient but also equipped with the moral compass necessary to advocate for transformative solutions that prioritize equity and sustainability.

Moreover, the reliance on established educational theories must be juxtaposed with a willingness to innovate and question their limitations. As we advance further into the complexities of the 21st century, it is imperative that urban design programs evolve to address the unpredictability inherent in urban design, adapting their pedagogical approaches to respond dynamically to emerging challenges and ensure that educators and students alike remain at the forefront of critical thought and action.

In this respect, Urban Design programs must transcend traditional academic boundaries to effectively fulfil their societal roles. They must cultivate not only proficient practitioners but also collaborative thinkers who understand that the visioning of equitable urban futures is a transdisciplinary endeavor, involving diverse perspectives from various stakeholders and place-makers. This inclusive approach acknowledges the intricate relationship between urban design and social justice, emphasizing the need for collective action in addressing community challenges. Such an undertaking demands courage, creativity, and a resolute commitment to interrogating the status quo. By adopting this collaborative framework, Urban Design degrees can truly function as catalysts for meaningful and transformative change within our increasingly complex urban environments.

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Jodi Lawton: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Analysis, Data curation, Conceptualisation, Data visualisation. Bruce Judd: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

Ethics Committee Approval

Ethics committee permission HC230125.

Resume

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