

# Bridging academia and practice: Evolving pedagogies in urban design education

Mona El Khafif\* Nico Larco\*\* 

## Abstract

Urban design education is confronting growing pressures to respond to increasingly complex urban, environmental, and socio-political challenges while remaining relevant to professional practice. This paper presents findings from a qualitative, interview-based study conducted by the Urban Design Academic Council (UDAC) between 2023 and 2025, drawing on semi-structured conversations with fourteen urban design practices operating across diverse institutional and geographic contexts in the United States. Rather than offering a comprehensive literature review of urban design pedagogy, the paper foregrounds practitioner perspectives as an empirical and practice-informed contribution to ongoing disciplinary discussions. The interviews examine professional expectations of urban design education, including desired skills, perceived gaps in graduate preparedness, emerging trends in practice, and opportunities for deeper collaboration between academia and the profession. Findings reveal consistent emphasis on strategic and systemic thinking, narrative and communicative competence, interdisciplinary fluency, and preparedness to engage climate resilience, equity, and infrastructural complexity at multiple scales. Practitioners also highlight the value of pedagogical models that integrate experiential learning, joint research initiatives, and sustained professional engagement within academic settings. By documenting and synthesizing practitioner insights, this study contributes a field-level snapshot of current professional priorities and challenges in urban design. The paper positions interview-based inquiry as both a research method and a pedagogical tool, offering an empirical foundation for future curriculum development, mixed-methods research, and cross-institutional collaboration aimed at strengthening the alignment between urban design education and contemporary practice.

**Keywords:** urban design pedagogy, urban design professional practice, urban design academic council, qualitative interviews, academia and practice

## 1. Introduction: Bridging Academia and Practice

Urban design occupies a distinctive position between the worlds of theory and practice, requiring continual negotiation between academic inquiry and the applied demands of the profession. Unlike fields with a more established disciplinary infrastructure, urban design has historically been situated at the margins of architecture, planning, and landscape architecture, often defined through its interstitial status rather than by a consolidated body of knowledge or a disciplinary container (Carmona, 2019). Frequently described as a “field” to which multiple disciplines contribute to shaping and constructing urban environments, this liminality creates both a challenge and an opportunity: the challenge lies in articulating urban design’s disciplinary autonomy, while the opportunity lies in its potential to synthesize diverse perspectives into innovative approaches for addressing contemporary urban challenges.

The Urban Design Academic Council, founded in 2020 as a framework to bring together institutions in North America that offer urban design degrees, certificates, or host centers, has emerged as an important forum for advancing this mission. According to its statement of purpose, UDAC “supports educators, researchers, and professionals who advocate for the value of urban design in academia and practice,” while also seeking to expand research, mentor the next

\* (Corresponding author), Assoc. Prof. Dr., The University of Virginia, United States [me9gn@virginia.edu](mailto:me9gn@virginia.edu)

\*\* Prof. Dr., University of Oregon, United States [nlarco@uoregon.edu](mailto:nlarco@uoregon.edu)

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generation of faculty, foster pedagogical innovation, and strengthen connections to the profession. By situating itself explicitly at the intersection of academia and practice, UDAC underscores that urban design must be understood not only as a site of intellectual production but also as a field inseparable from real-world application.

This paper builds on UDAC's mission by examining one of its core strategies: supporting the development and strengthening of the discipline through direct engagement with practitioners to better understand professional needs and expectations. The rationale for such engagement is multifold. First, it grounds theoretical frameworks developed in universities within the realities of practice, revealing how abstract models are adapted—or resisted—under conditions shaped by regulation, politics, and resource constraints. Second, it complements existing scholarship on urban design pedagogy that calls for closer alignment between academic frameworks and the diverse, often informal processes through which cities are produced. As Loukaitou-Sideris and Mukhija (2016) demonstrate through their analysis of studio pedagogy and the literature on informality, urban design education must critically engage real-world actors, power structures, and non-formal modes of urbanization to prepare students for contemporary practice. Practitioner interviews extend this pedagogical imperative by documenting pathways, challenges, and professional expectations that can better equip graduates to navigate both formal and informal dimensions of urban design work. Third, while all interviews were conducted with offices located in the United States, the study captures a range of perspectives across geographies, institutional settings, and modes of practice, thereby challenging narrow conceptions of urban design and contributing to a broader epistemological understanding of the field. Moreover, by drawing on practitioner insights, academic institutions are better positioned to reform curricula and research agendas in response to emerging challenges such as climate adaptation, equitable development, and resilience planning. This iterative process of feedback between practitioners and educators does more than update course content; it redefines the discipline itself, making urban design education more adaptable, responsive, and socially relevant.

This paper situates UDAC's initiative as part of a broader discourse on how to align the discipline's academic foundations with the complex demands of practice. By analyzing the role of professional interviews as a pedagogical and research method, the paper argues that closer integration of practice-based knowledge is essential for urban design's maturation as a field. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing project of consolidating urban design as both an intellectual and professional endeavor, committed to shaping democratic, just, livable, and sustainable cities.

## **2. Methodology: Practitioner Interviews as Pedagogical and Research Inquiry**

Between November 2023 and January 2025, the authors, who are also members of the Urban Design Academic Council, conducted a series of practitioner interviews designed to explore the relationship between urban design education and professional practice. A total of 14 offices were interviewed, each representing firms with dedicated urban design departments or offices engaged in urban design projects. These practices were selected because of their strong ties to academia: they regularly participate in final reviews, collaborate through sponsored studios, or actively seek out academic networks when recruiting emerging professionals. This purposive sampling reflects UDAC's mission to strengthen the bridge between academic and professional spheres. Geographically, most of the interviewed practices were located along the East and West Coasts of the United States, with a few offices in the Midwest and two offices originally based in Europe. While their physical headquarters varied, many of these practices conduct work both throughout the United States and internationally, reflecting the increasingly global scope of urban design (Carmona, 2019). Each interview was structured as a one-hour, semi-structured conversation. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized in design-related fields for balancing consistency and flexibility: researchers use a set of guiding questions to ensure comparability while allowing space for new themes to emerge (Groat & Wang, 2013). In this study, all conversations followed six core questions:

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1. What skills are you looking for in urban design hires?
2. What do you think is lacking or could be improved in the current graduates you are seeing?
3. Where are your urban design hires coming from (disciplines, schools, or prior experience)?
4. What do you see as the most critical emerging trends or directions in urban design practice?
5. What would you like to see as productive synergies between the urban design profession and academia?
6. How are you seeking out urban design expertise through job advertisements, and what professional degree qualifications do you require?

The interviews were recorded, and responses were simultaneously summarized into bullet-point notes during the sessions. Data were then anonymized and collectively synthesized to highlight emerging themes rather than privileging individual voices. At this stage, no weighting of responses has been applied; findings should be understood as preliminary and subject to refinement in future iterations. This approach is consistent with interpretive traditions in urban design research, which emphasize pattern recognition and thematic synthesis over statistical generalizability (Groat & Wang, 2013).

By structuring the inquiry around these six guiding questions, the project directly engages with ongoing debates about the skills, knowledge, and capacities required for urban design practice in the 21st century. The process of interviewing also embodies UDAC's broader pedagogical goals by facilitating dialogue between academia and professional practice. "Integrating practitioner insights into academic frameworks allows urban design education to remain responsive to rapidly evolving societal challenges such as climate change, equity, and resilience (Carmona, 2019; Salama, 2015)."

In this sense, the interview process serves not only as a research method but also as a pedagogical intervention, aligning with UDAC's commitment to prepare students for professional trajectories that are adaptable, interdisciplinary, and socially engaged.

### 3. Interview Findings

In the following abstract, we summarize the answers to the questions listed above. To avoid the advertisement of specific academic institutions and urban design programs, question 3: Where are your urban design hires coming from (disciplines, schools, or prior experience)? was excluded from this summary chapter.

#### *Question 1: What skills are you looking for in urban design hires?*

Urban design candidates are expected to possess a strong foundation in design, combining technical proficiency with conceptual clarity. This was consistently reported as a fundamental skill with interviewees putting high value on a strong portfolio demonstrating design excellence and experience in streetscape and public space projects. Essential skills also included expertise in design software such as Rhino, Revit, SketchUp, CAD, GIS, and Adobe Suite, alongside traditional hand-sketching abilities.

Further, critical thinking and problem-solving were also central, with designers expected to question assumptions, develop clear concepts, and address societal challenges, including climate resilience and social equity. Effective communication, both written and verbal, was crucial for reporting, presenting, and engaging with clients, consultants, and the public. The ability to craft compelling narratives that convey the experience and vision of a design was also emphasized.

Collaboration was a key requirement; candidates should demonstrate teamwork experience and capacity, interdisciplinary fluency across architecture, landscape architecture, and planning, and the capacity to navigate projects that involve multiple stakeholders. Urban designers must be versatile, adaptable to new technologies, capable of learning quickly, and able to handle responsibility in fast-paced environments. An understanding of scale, system thinking, and the

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functioning of urban environments—including cultural, economic, and environmental dynamics—was further essential. Familiarity with resilience science, policy, finance, and regulatory frameworks added further value. Soft skills, such as empathy, leadership, and cross-disciplinary collaboration, were critical for sustaining professional relationships and advancing project goals.

Finally, passion for the field, curiosity about urban issues, and engagement with current events were seen as distinguishing traits, reflecting a broader generalist mindset that combines design excellence, practical experience, and societal awareness to create meaningful urban interventions.

*Question 2: What do you think is lacking or could be improved in the current graduates?*

This question was meant to identify key gaps in the preparedness of current urban design graduates, based on qualitative insights from professional practitioners. One of the most frequently cited deficiencies was in strategic and holistic thinking; graduates often remain anchored in specialized or technical perspectives and require guidance to approach design with a broader, integrative mindset. Closely related was the need for deeper real-world understanding, encompassing professional practice, the drivers of urban projects, and the consequences of high-level decisions.

Graduates were also found to demonstrate limited capacity for storytelling and argumentation, with room to strengthen their ability to communicate design ideas through research, narrative, and collaborative reasoning. Formal design skills and spatial awareness remained inconsistent, with some graduates lacking both conceptual rigor and sensitivity to human experience within urban contexts. Similarly, systems thinking—considering ecological, social, and infrastructural networks beyond human-centric concerns—emerged as an area for growth. While technical proficiency in software such as Revit, Rhino, and CAD was expected, interview responses emphasize that general design thinking, versatility across scales, and problem-solving confidence are more critical. Effective communication through diagrams, presentations, and concise reporting was frequently noted as underdeveloped, alongside the need for stronger time management, independent workflow, and initiative in complex projects.

Finally, engagement with multidisciplinary teams was highlighted as essential; graduates must navigate governance, finance, and regulatory frameworks while collaborating across architecture, planning, and landscape disciplines. Overall, the findings suggest that bridging technical skills with strategic, communicative, and integrative capacities is central to advancing the professional readiness of urban design graduates, fostering designers who are adaptable, confident, and capable of generating impactful, socially responsive urban interventions.

*Question 4: What do you see as the most critical emerging trends or directions in urban design practice?*

Central among emerging trends reported by interviewees was an urgent focus on climate resilience and sustainability, with urban design increasingly seen as critical to addressing sea level rise, extreme weather events, and broader strategies for climate change mitigation. Relatedly, concerns with equity and social justice were also prominent, as designers seek to create inclusive, equitable neighborhoods and public spaces. Similarly, sustainability and resilience were reported as being reframed at the urban scale, moving beyond individual buildings to systemic approaches that tackle affordability, housing, and spatial equity.

Additionally, interviewees also reported that knowledge about the adaptation and reuse of existing structures and infrastructures—such as shopping malls, office parks, and other underutilized spaces—responding to pressures of land scarcity, urban sprawl, and shifting economic patterns was important. The integration of infrastructure and urban design also gained prominence, with practitioners emphasizing the need for holistic approaches that consider transportation, water, energy, and waste systems as integral to shaping urban environments.

A holistic and interdisciplinary problem-solving orientation was viewed as essential, requiring collaboration across planning, architecture, landscape architecture, economics, and governance.

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Mobility and public realm design—ranging from complete streets and “middle housing” to zoning and regulatory frameworks—remain central to shaping livable and accessible cities. At the same time, measurable frameworks such as Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) metrics were reported as increasingly guiding project evaluation and accountability.

Finally, technology and digital tools were reported as transforming practice, with the use of big data, artificial intelligence, and advanced computational methods supporting analysis, visualization, and decision-making. Together, these trends highlighted an urban design field that is adapting to climate challenges, prioritizing equity, leveraging interdisciplinary collaboration, and embracing digital innovation to produce resilient and socially responsive urban futures.

*Question 5: What would you like to see as productive synergies between the urban design profession and academia?*

The relationship between urban design academia and professional practice is increasingly recognized as a site of generative exchange. Interviewees reported that joint research initiatives offer a compelling model for collaboration, where academic institutions contribute theoretical depth and methodological rigor, while practitioners bring contextual knowledge and operational insight. These partnerships can produce innovative responses to complex urban challenges and foster a shared culture of inquiry. Similarly, the integration of professionals into academic teaching—whether through studio instruction, seminars, or critique—grounds pedagogy in real-world conditions and enhances students’ capacity to navigate the multifaceted realities of urban design.

Interviewees also reported strong interest in a shared infrastructure of resources—such as project archives, annotated case studies, and/or white papers—that could serve both academic and professional communities, enabling comparative analysis and pedagogical experimentation. The appointment of practitioners as visiting faculty or fellows could strengthen this bridge, allowing for sustained engagement with evolving industry practices. These roles not only enrich the curriculum but also recalibrate institutional priorities to reflect contemporary urban issues. Experiential learning models, including community-engaged studios and pro bono collaborations, were of interest as they immerse students in the socio-political dimensions of urban design, foregrounding ethical reasoning, stakeholder negotiation, and adaptive problem-solving.

Professionals were also interested in external research opportunities—such as externships and shadow ships—that offer students short-term immersion in professional environments, complementing academic learning with direct exposure to project delivery, client interaction, and institutional dynamics. These experiences foster professional readiness and deepen students’ understanding of the field’s operational contours.

Interviewees reported a strong interest in travel-based learning, including site visits and international exchanges, which cultivates spatial literacy and cultural sensitivity, exposing students to diverse urban contexts and design paradigms. A coordinated network of academic institutions and professional offices was suggested as a means of facilitating such initiatives, potentially supported by targeted fundraising efforts. Urban design fellowships for faculty and students, inter-school partnerships, and collaborative staffing models were noted as other ways to reinforce a more integrated and responsive urban design education ecosystem.

*Question 6: How are you seeking out urban design expertise through job advertisements, and what professional degree qualifications do you require?*

While many firms explicitly post positions for “urban designers,” the qualifications sought varied widely, ranging from advanced degrees in urban design or planning to combinations of architecture and landscape architecture. Some firms prioritize candidates with dual degrees—such as architecture and urban design—recognizing the value of interdisciplinary fluency and the ability to operate across scales and densities.

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The role of applicants having Urban Design credentials in hiring decisions was nuanced. While some firms explicitly seek candidates with Master of Urban Design (MUD) degrees, others are more flexible, accepting applicants with undergraduate design degrees supplemented by coursework or experience in urban design. Portfolios remain a critical evaluative tool, with emphasis placed on clarity of individual contributions within group projects and the demonstration of graphic and conceptual abilities. Firms also express appreciation for candidates who can “wear both hats”—combining design sensibility with planning acumen—particularly in contexts that span suburban and urban scales. Some professionals said they may not actively seek UD credentials due to the lack of potential applicants with these credentials. This variability underscores the lack of a standardized pathway into the profession, a limited supply of credentialed professionals, and reflects broader questions about the definition and boundaries of urban design as a distinct field.

Despite the presence of formal job postings, many firms rely heavily on informal networks and word-of-mouth referrals to identify qualified candidates. Connections to academic institutions play a significant role, with professors often recommending graduates directly to firms. This informal recruitment process places a premium on soft skills—such as collaboration, communication, and systems thinking—which are often evaluated through interviews and portfolio reviews. However, practitioners noted that these competencies are unevenly distributed, with only a fraction of technically proficient candidates demonstrating the interpersonal and integrative abilities required for urban design work.

Overall, there is a growing recognition within practice of the need for a more clearly defined and dedicated urban design profession. Practitioners acknowledged the importance of academic programs in carving out space for UD as a distinct discipline and welcomed the emergence of specialized degrees. Yet, the hiring landscape remains fragmented, shaped by firm-specific priorities, project demands, and the evolving nature of urban design itself. This tension between formal qualifications and practical adaptability highlights the ongoing negotiation between academia and practice in shaping the future of the field.

#### **4. Next Steps: Bridging Qualitative and Quantitative Insights**

Interviews with practitioners have long been recognized as a valuable tool in urban research, providing insights into the lived realities of design and planning work that may not be captured through theoretical or documentary analysis alone. In the context of urban design education, they serve not only as a research method but also as a pedagogical strategy that connects students and faculty with the professional environment they seek to influence. By eliciting reflections from practitioners on their challenges, strategies, and innovations, interviews allow academic inquiry to be grounded in the complexities of practice (Salama, 2015).

The findings from the initial UDAC interviews indicate that urban design firms seek candidates with strong design skills, a holistic understanding of urban systems, and collaborative competencies, reflecting broader findings on essential urban design skills in contemporary practice (Carmona et al., 2008). But most importantly, the interviews revealed that the profession values the growing presence and confirms the importance of urban design. Practitioners further highlighted the need for future urban designers to engage directly with pressing global challenges—most notably climate change adaptation, the integration of emerging technologies, and the navigation of increasing political and economic uncertainty. These demands align with recent scholarship arguing that urban design must continually evolve to remain responsive to dynamic environmental and social conditions but also benefits from learning through professional practice (Carmona, 2019; Savage, 2005).

While the first phase of interviews provides critical insights, the project is explicitly framed as a work in progress. UDAC intends to expand the scope of inquiry by conducting additional semi-structured interviews with practices across a broader geographic spectrum in the United States, including regions beyond the coasts, to capture a wider diversity of voices and contexts. In addition, future iterations will include a stronger emphasis on public-sector perspectives, such as planning

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departments, to explore how administrative frameworks both support and constrain urban design practice. Parallel to expanding the qualitative component, UDAC is preparing a quantitative phase through large-scale data collection. Specifically, an online survey will be distributed to a wide range of practices—including boutique design firms, large corporate offices, planning agencies, and interdisciplinary firms in adjacent fields such as engineering—to capture more representative patterns across the profession. The upcoming quantitative survey will complement qualitative interviews, enabling a mixed-methods approach to better understand skill priorities across diverse practices (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) and providing a statistically informed basis for curriculum recommendations. As Groat and Wang (2013) argue, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods offers a more robust and triangulated understanding of design practice. By moving toward this mixed-methods approach and contextualizing this work in a more comprehensive literature review in the future, UDAC seeks to establish a richer empirical basis for reforming urban design curricula and advancing its mission of bridging academia and practice.

Ultimately, the next steps in this research aim to consolidate insights from both qualitative dialogues and quantitative patterns, producing actionable knowledge that can inform both pedagogy and professional development, and ensuring that the discipline continues to equip students with the skills and capacities needed to design democratic, resilient, and sustainable cities.

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## CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

*Mona El Khafif: Research and Writing – interviewing, writing & editing, Research – conduction of original interviews, analysis and editing, Writing – original draft, Introduction, Methodology, Findings, and Next Steps. Nico Larco: Research and Writing – interviewing, writing & editing, Research – conduction of original interviews, initial analysis of finding and editing – Writing – edited draft of all sections.*

## 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 is not required.*

## Resume

*Mona El Khafif is an architect, urban designer, and committed educator. She is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Virginia School of Architecture, where she serves as a graduate program director*

*for Urban Design. She received her professional architecture degree (Dipl. Ing. Architecture) from the RWTH in Aachen and her PhD in Urban Design from the University of Technology Vienna. She co-authored the award-winning URBANbuild: Local/Global (2009), published Staged Urbanism (2009, German edition), and recently co-edited Next New York (2022). Her work spans multiple scales, integrating temporal, typological, and collaborative strategies in both design, pedagogy, and writing.*

*Nico Larco, AIA, is an urban designer, architect, and professor. He leads ELEMENT/Urban Design, a design and consulting firm, and is a Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at the University of Oregon, where he also directs the Urbanism Next Center and co-directs the Sustainable Cities Institute. Prof. Larco developed the Sustainable Urban Design Framework and is lead author of the Sustainable Urban Design Handbook (2024). His Urbanism Next work explores how technologies such as shared mobility, autonomous vehicles, e-commerce, and the sharing economy are reshaping cities. He serves as Strategic Advisor and researcher at TNO (Netherlands) and has worked with the EU, US Congress, and cities across North America and Europe.*

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