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The Ateljé Y model

a two-year studio-based pedagogy in early architectural education (Lund University, 2012–2022)

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***The Ateljé Y Model: A Two-Year Studio-Based Pedagogy in Early Architectural Education
(Lund University, 2012–2022)***

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Pedagogical Study

2026

*The Ateljé Y Model: A Two-Year Studio-Based Pedagogy in Early Architectural Education
(Lund University, 2012–2022)*

Abstract

This study examines the ateljé system as a studio-based teaching model used in the first two years of architectural education at Lund University between 2012 and 2022. Based on teaching material, student work, course structures, and the author's experience, it analyses how learning develops through iterative design work, continuous feedback, and interaction between students.

The study shows how continuity over time supports student development and how the relationship between process and result is negotiated in practice. It also identifies key challenges related to progression, coordination, and variation between teaching approaches.

As the ateljé system has recently been replaced by a new structure, the study provides a documented reference point for future evaluation of pedagogical change in architectural education.

Keywords: architectural education; studio pedagogy; project-based learning; design studio; learning by doing; feedback; architectural design; higher education

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1. Introduction

Architectural education is shaped by an ongoing discussion about how students learn to design. Some approaches emphasise technical knowledge and structured skill-building, while others focus on creativity, exploration, and conceptual thinking. In many programmes, these aspects are introduced separately, and students are expected to bring them together later in their studies. This separation can make it difficult for students to understand how different forms of knowledge relate to each other in practice.

The design studio has long been a central format in architectural education, as it allows students to work through complex problems by doing. However, the way studios are organised varies widely. Questions about size, structure, feedback, and progression remain open, and different schools respond to them in different ways.

At Lund University, the *ateljé* system was introduced in the early 2000s as part of a broader reform of the architecture programme. The aim was to strengthen the core of the education by focusing on architectural methods, tools, and concepts through project-based learning. Instead of organising teaching into many separate courses, the first two years were structured as studio environments where different aspects of architecture were integrated.

Within this system, students worked in small groups (*ateljés*), mixing first- and second-year students. Teaching was based on a sequence of projects and exercises, combined with continuous feedback and dialogue between students and teachers. The intention was to create a learning environment where knowledge could develop over time, rather than in isolated course units.

This paper focuses on *Ateljé Y* between 2012 and 2022, a period during which the author was actively involved in the teaching of the studio, first as a studio teacher, later as co-responsible, and subsequently as director. During these years, the teaching was shaped both by the general structure of the *ateljé* system and by local adaptations in response to student needs, teaching experience, and institutional conditions.

The studio also produced a range of material, including student work, course structures, and a booklet documenting a full two-year cycle. In addition, an earlier study developed within the ResArc research environment (2016) examined the specific conditions of mixed first- and second-year studios, focusing on collaboration, learning processes, and evaluation. This study forms part of the broader pedagogical development documented in this paper.

The aim of this study is to describe and analyse how this model works in practice. It looks at how learning develops over time, how feedback is organised, and how students move from guided exercises towards more independent work. The study is based on pedagogical documentation, student projects, and the author's experience as a teacher within the system.

The *ateljé* system has recently been replaced by a new structure in the programme. As this transition is still ongoing, its effects cannot yet be evaluated. Rather than comparing systems, this paper documents and reflects on the *ateljé* model as it was practiced over time. In doing so, it provides a clear reference point for future studies of pedagogical change in architectural education.

2. Background: The Ateljé System

The ateljé system was introduced at Lund University in the early 2000s as part of a broader reform of the architecture programme. The reform followed a national evaluation of architectural education in Sweden, which raised questions about fragmentation, lack of integration, and delayed development of design skills. In response, the programme was reorganised to place greater emphasis on the core of architectural practice.

The pedagogical ideas behind the reform were developed by several teachers involved in the programme, including Tomas Tägil. His work emphasised project-based learning, continuity over time, and the importance of learning through practice. These ideas informed the structure of the ateljé system and its focus on integrating different aspects of architectural education within a studio environment.

A central idea of the reform was to replace a structure based on many separate courses with a more integrated form of teaching. Instead of dividing knowledge into subjects such as technology, history, or representation, the ateljé system brought these aspects together through project-based work. The aim was to allow students to engage with architectural problems in a more holistic way from the beginning of their education.

Teaching in the first two years was organised in studios, referred to as ateljés. Each ateljé functioned as a small learning environment, led by a group of teachers with different backgrounds and competences. These teachers worked together within the same framework, but each ateljé developed its own approach in terms of exercises, themes, and teaching methods.

A defining feature of the system was the mixing of first- and second-year students within the same studio. This created a situation where students at different levels worked side by side. The intention was to support peer learning and to make progression visible within the group. First-year students could observe and learn from more experienced students, while second-year students could reflect on their own work by explaining it to others.

The structure also emphasised continuity over time. Rather than treating each semester or course as a separate unit, the ateljé model allowed students to develop their work across a longer period. Projects and exercises were connected, and feedback could build from one stage to the next. This made it possible to follow both individual and collective development more closely.

At the same time, the system allowed for variation. While all ateljés operated within the same overall framework, differences in teaching approaches were not only accepted but encouraged. This created a diverse pedagogical environment within a shared structure.

The ateljé system can therefore be understood as a balance between integration and variation: a common framework for early architectural education, combined with locally developed teaching practices within each studio.

3. Pedagogical Principles

The ateljé system is based on a set of pedagogical principles that define how teaching is organised and how students are expected to learn. These principles provide a general framework rather than a fixed method.

3.1 Learning by doing

Architecture is learned through practice. Students develop their skills by engaging directly in design work, where drawing, building models and testing ideas are part of the learning process itself.

3.2 Repetition and variation

Students work with recurring types of problems across different projects. Repetition builds experience, while variation in context and scale introduces new challenges.

3.3 Reflection through representation

Drawings, models, and texts support reflection. By revisiting their work, students can better understand their development over time.

3.4 Process and result

The process is central to learning, but the final result also matters. Students are expected both to develop their ideas and to communicate them clearly.

3.5 Dialogue and feedback

Learning is supported through continuous dialogue between students and teachers. Feedback is part of the process and contributes to the development of the work.

3.6 Continuity over time

Learning is understood as a gradual process. Students build on previous work, allowing knowledge and skills to develop over time.

4. The Ateljé Y Practice (2012–2022)

Ateljé Y was one of four architectural design studios within the ateljé system at Lund University. It brought together a mixed group of first- and second-year students who worked in the same studio over a two-year period. The group typically consisted of around 30–40 students and was guided by a small team of teachers.

The studio functioned as a continuous working environment rather than a sequence of separate courses. Students shared the same space, worked in parallel, and were able to follow each other's processes over time. This created a situation where individual work developed within a collective setting.

4.1 Structure of the teaching

Teaching was organised around a sequence of projects and exercises that varied in duration and complexity. Short assignments focused on specific aspects of architectural work, such as spatial composition, material exploration, or representation techniques. These were followed by longer projects where several aspects had to be combined.

For example, an early exercise might focus on understanding space through physical models, while a later project could require students to design a small building, addressing structure, programme, and context at the same time.

Rather than separating technical, conceptual, and practical knowledge into different courses, these aspects were addressed within the same project. Students were expected to work across different types of questions simultaneously, even at an early stage.

4.2 The two-year cycle

A defining feature of Ateljé Y was the two-year structure. Students entered the studio in their first year and continued into the second year without changing group or teachers.

This made it possible to connect projects over time. Questions introduced in earlier exercises could reappear in later work, often at a higher level of complexity. Students were not only exposed to new problems, but also returned to familiar ones with increased experience.

The presence of second-year students influenced the working environment. First-year students could observe more advanced work and gain a clearer sense of what progression might look like. At the same time, second-year students were encouraged to revisit and refine approaches they had previously encountered.

4.3 Daily work and interaction

Most of the learning took place in everyday studio situations. Students worked at their desks, developed drawings and models, and discussed their work with teachers and peers throughout the day.

Teachers moved through the studio, engaging in short but frequent conversations with students. These interactions often focused on specific decisions, such as spatial organisation, proportions, or representation, and allowed students to adjust their work continuously.

In addition to these informal exchanges, more structured moments were organised. Mid-reviews gave students the opportunity to present work in progress, while final presentations focused on communicating the project as a whole. In some cases, external critics were invited, introducing additional perspectives.

4.4 The role of the booklet

In 2016, a booklet was produced to document a full two-year cycle in Ateljé Y. It included descriptions of exercises, student work, and examples from different stages of the design process.

The booklet did not focus only on final results. It also included sketches, intermediate models, and partial solutions. This made it possible to see how ideas developed over time and how different students approached similar tasks.

As a pedagogical tool, the booklet supported reflection at both individual and collective levels. Students could recognise their own development, while teachers could use the material to review the structure of the teaching and identify areas for adjustment.

4.5 Teaching roles and collaboration

Teaching in Ateljé Y was carried out by a small team, often including course leaders and assistants with different professional backgrounds. This created a range of perspectives, from more conceptual approaches to more pragmatic ones.

The presence of multiple teachers allowed students to encounter different ways of thinking about architecture. At the same time, it required coordination within the teaching team. Discussions between teachers were necessary to maintain a shared direction and to ensure that feedback remained consistent.

Over time, this collaboration became an important part of the teaching process, shaping both the organisation of projects and the way students were guided.

4.6 Working across levels and experiences

The mixed structure of first- and second-year students created a learning environment where different levels of experience were present at the same time.

First-year students were introduced to the studio culture and could observe how more experienced students approached similar tasks. Second-year students, in turn, were often required to explain and reflect on their work, which reinforced their own understanding.

This interaction was not formally structured but emerged through the shared working environment. Its effectiveness depended on how actively students engaged with each other's work.

Summary

Ateljé Y can be understood as a structured but open learning environment. It combined a clear framework, based on projects, continuity, and shared space, with room for variation in both teaching approaches and student responses.

Rather than focusing on isolated outcomes, the studio made it possible to follow learning as a process that develops over time, through repeated work, interaction, and gradual shifts in responsibility.

5. Development and Changes in Teaching

The teaching in Ateljé Y did not remain fixed over time. Instead, it developed through a continuous process of adjustment, influenced by experience, student responses, and changing conditions within the programme.

Rather than following a predefined model, the studio evolved through practice. This development can be understood in three main phases.

5.1 Early phase: structure and control

In the early years, the teaching focused on introducing students to the basic tools and methods of architecture. Exercises were carefully structured, and the progression between tasks was clearly defined.

This approach provided stability and made expectations easier to understand, especially for students with little previous experience. However, it also had limitations. In some cases, students became too focused on following instructions rather than developing their own ideas.

The work could become reproductive, with students aiming to meet given criteria instead of exploring alternatives. While this supported technical development, it sometimes limited independence and risk-taking.

5.2 Transition phase: increasing openness

Around 2016, changes were introduced to encourage more independent work. The structure of assignments became more open, and students were given greater responsibility for defining their own approaches.

The intention was to move away from a controlled learning environment towards one that allowed for more exploration and variation.

However, these changes were implemented relatively quickly and without sufficient adjustment of the overall structure. As a result, some students experienced uncertainty. Expectations became less clear, and the balance between guidance and independence was not always well defined.

This phase highlighted the difficulty of shifting from a structured to a more open form of teaching. Increasing freedom did not automatically lead to better learning outcomes, and in some cases it created confusion.

5.3 Later phase: balancing structure and independence

In the following years, the teaching was gradually adjusted again. The aim was to find a better balance between structure and openness.

Assignments were designed to provide clearer frameworks while still allowing for individual interpretation. Feedback was used more actively to support students in developing their own ideas, rather than simply evaluating results.

By around 2022, the studio had reached a more stable form. Students were able to work more independently, but within a structure that supported their development. The relationship between exercises, projects, and feedback became more coherent over time.

5.4 Learning from the process

This development shows that teaching methods cannot be transferred directly without adaptation. Changes in structure, feedback, and expectations have complex effects on how students work and learn.

One key insight is that independence needs to be developed gradually. Too much control can limit exploration, but too much openness can create uncertainty. The challenge is to create conditions where students can take responsibility for their work while still receiving enough guidance.

Another important aspect is the role of time. Adjustments in teaching often require several iterations before their effects become clear. What appears as a problem in one phase may lead to improvements in another.

Summary

The development of Ateljé Y can be understood as a process of continuous calibration. Teaching moved between different positions, more structured, more open, before reaching a more balanced approach.

This process is an important part of the study, as it shows how pedagogical models are shaped not only by initial ideas, but by ongoing practice and reflection.

6. How Learning Happens

Learning in the ateljé does not take place at a single moment, such as a final presentation or assessment. Instead, it develops gradually through continuous work, repeated feedback, and interaction over time. Learning is therefore not something that happens after the work is completed, but something that is built into the process itself.

Several elements work together to support this form of learning.

6.1 Learning over time

A key condition for learning in the ateljé is continuity. Students remain in the same studio for two years, often working with the same teachers and alongside both first- and second-year students.

This makes it possible to follow development over a longer period. Each project builds on previous ones, rather than starting from zero. Students can return to earlier ideas, improve them, or approach them from a new perspective.

Over time, this creates a cumulative form of learning. Knowledge is not only gained within individual projects, but develops across multiple situations. Students begin to recognise recurring questions and can handle them with increasing confidence.

6.2 Feedback as part of the work

Feedback is an integrated part of the working process. It is given continuously, both in informal situations, such as short conversations at the desk, and in more structured formats like mid-reviews and final critiques.

Because feedback happens repeatedly, students are able to test ideas and adjust their work step by step. Instead of waiting for a final evaluation, they receive guidance while the project is still developing.

This changes the role of feedback. It is not only used to judge the final result, but to support the process itself. In this way, feedback becomes a tool for learning, rather than a separate stage at the end.

6.3 Learning from others

The studio environment allows students to learn from each other. Since students work in the same space, they are constantly exposed to different approaches, ideas, and levels of development.

First-year students can observe how more experienced students work, while second-year students reinforce their own understanding by explaining and discussing their projects. This creates a form of peer learning that complements the guidance provided by teachers.

At the same time, this interaction can be uneven. Some students engage actively in discussions, while others participate less. The learning potential depends on how open and supportive the studio environment is.

6.4 From guidance to independence

At the beginning of their studies, students often rely on clear instructions and frequent guidance. Over time, they are expected to take more responsibility for their work.

The ateljé structure supports this shift by allowing students to encounter similar types of problems more than once. With each project, they gain more experience and are able to make more independent decisions.

However, this development is not automatic. If guidance is too strong, students may remain dependent. If it is too weak, they may become uncertain. The transition from guidance to independence therefore depends on how teaching is structured and how feedback is given.

6.5 The role of the studio environment

The physical and social setting of the studio plays an important role in learning. Students work in a shared space, where they can see each other's work, follow ongoing processes, and take part in informal discussions.

This creates a learning situation that is both individual and collective. Each student develops their own project, but does so within a context that is constantly influenced by others.

The studio also creates a sense of continuity and presence. Learning is not limited to scheduled teaching moments, but continues through everyday activity in the space.

6.6 Tensions within the process

While the ateljé supports continuous learning, it also contains internal tensions.

One tension concerns the relationship between process and result. Even when teaching emphasises exploration and development, students often focus on producing a strong final presentation. This can limit experimentation, especially near deadlines.

Another tension relates to differences between students. Variations in experience, confidence, and working methods can affect how students benefit from the shared environment.

Finally, the system depends on a balance between structure and openness. If expectations are unclear, students may struggle to understand what is required. If the structure is too rigid, opportunities for exploration may be reduced.

Summary

Learning in the atelier can be understood as a continuous and cumulative process. It develops through the interaction of time, feedback, shared work, and increasing independence.

Rather than being organised around isolated assignments, learning takes place through ongoing engagement with design problems. This allows students to build experience gradually and to develop their own ways of working.

7. Challenges and Limitations

While the ateljé system supports continuity, interaction, and process-based learning, it also presents a number of challenges. These do not necessarily undermine the model, but they reveal tensions that appear when it is applied in practice.

7.1 Progression and uneven development

One of the main challenges concerns student progression. Although the two-year structure allows for continuous development, it does not ensure that all students progress at the same pace.

Some students respond well to the open and exploratory nature of the studio, while others struggle with unclear expectations. For students who need more structure, the process can feel uncertain and difficult to navigate.

There are also questions about how this early-stage learning connects to later stages of the programme. In some cases, students who perform well in the ateljé environment may later show difficulties in working independently or adapting to different teaching formats.

7.2 Differences between studios

The ateljé system allows each studio to develop its own teaching approach. While this creates diversity, it can also lead to differences in student experience.

Students may perceive some studios as more demanding, more structured, or more supportive than others. These differences can affect both learning conditions and outcomes.

This raises questions about consistency within the programme, particularly when students from different studios are later evaluated together.

7.3 Coordination and teaching structure

Teaching in the ateljé depends on collaboration between several teachers, often with different backgrounds and approaches. This can enrich the learning environment, but it also requires coordination.

If communication between teachers is not strong enough, students may receive mixed signals. Expectations may become unclear, and guidance may vary depending on who is present.

Maintaining a shared direction while allowing individual teaching styles is therefore a continuous challenge.

7.4 Balance between process and result

Although the teaching emphasises the importance of process, students often remain focused on final results. Deadlines, presentations, and evaluation situations tend to reinforce this focus.

As a result, students may prioritise producing a strong final outcome over exploring alternative approaches. This can reduce experimentation and limit risk-taking.

The tension between process and result is therefore not only a theoretical issue, but a practical one that affects how students work.

7.5 Structural rigidity

The two-year structure provides continuity, but it can also reduce flexibility. When the organisation of projects follows a fixed pattern, it may be difficult to adapt to changing conditions.

Adjustments in teaching, staffing, or student needs can be harder to implement within a rigid structure. This can affect both planning and the ability to respond to emerging issues during the academic year.

7.6 Scale and resources

The ateljé model relies on close interaction between students and teachers. Continuous feedback, individual supervision, and long-term follow-up require time and presence.

When student numbers increase or resources are limited, it becomes more difficult to maintain the same level of attention. This can affect the quality of feedback and the overall learning experience.

The effectiveness of the model is therefore closely linked to available resources.

Summary

The challenges of the ateljé system are closely connected to its strengths. The same features that support learning, openness, continuity, and variation can also create uncertainty, unevenness, and coordination difficulties.

Understanding these tensions is essential for evaluating the model. They show that the system does not function automatically but depends on how it is implemented and maintained over time.

8. Transition and Future Questions

In recent years, the ateljé system has been replaced by a new structure in the first two years of the architecture programme at Lund University. This change represents a shift in how teaching is organised, particularly in terms of scale and the relationship between students and teachers.

The new model introduces a more centralised framework, where teaching is coordinated at a larger group level. This affects how projects are structured, how feedback is given, and how students move through the early stages of the programme. It also changes the conditions for continuity, as students may no longer remain within the same smaller studio environment over time.

At the time of writing, this transition is still ongoing. The first cohort of students has not yet completed the full cycle of studies, and it is therefore too early to assess the long-term effects of the new structure. In particular, questions related to student progression, independence, and the connection between early and later stages of the programme cannot yet be evaluated in a reliable way.

For this reason, the present study does not attempt to compare the two systems. Instead, it documents the ateljé model as it was developed and practiced over time.

The transition nevertheless raises a number of questions that remain open. How does a more centralised structure affect continuity in learning? What happens to ongoing feedback when teaching is organised at a larger scale? How are peer learning and informal interaction influenced when the studio environment changes? And how do students develop over time within the new structure?

These questions can only be addressed once students have progressed further through the programme and sufficient material becomes available for analysis.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined the ateljé system as a model for early architectural education, based on its implementation in Ateljé Y between 2012 and 2022. Drawing on pedagogical documentation, student work, and teaching experience, it has described how the model operates in practice and how learning develops within it.

The analysis shows that learning in this context is shaped by continuity, repeated engagement with design problems, and ongoing feedback. Rather than being organised around isolated assignments, it emerges through a sustained process in which students gradually build experience and develop their own ways of working.

At the same time, the study highlights that these conditions require careful calibration. The balance between structure and openness, the organisation of feedback, and the coordination between teachers all play a decisive role in how the model functions. Differences in student progression and variations between studios indicate that the system does not produce uniform outcomes, but depends on how it is implemented in practice.

The development of Ateljé Y over time also shows that teaching methods are not fixed. They evolve through use, and their effects become visible only through repeated adjustments and reflection. In this sense, the pedagogical model is not only a framework for teaching, but also something that is continuously shaped through it.

By documenting and analysing this model, the study provides a clear account of one approach to early architectural education. It shows how the organisation of teaching can influence how students learn to think, work, and develop as architects.

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The booklet documenting the two-year cycle (2014–2016) was produced together with Karin Lindström.

Parts of this study are also connected to previous collaborative work within the ResArc research environment.