

RCA Podcast: Transcript

RCA2024 Dean's Download with Adrian Lahoud, Dean of the School of Architecture

Recorded on Monday 24 June 2024

00:00:00:06 - 00:00:27:07

Dr Adrian Lahoud

I hope they get a sense of the spirit of the school. And I think by that I mean that there is a very, very particular coming together of faculty and students right now in the School of Architecture that feels very alive and vital and committed. And so it's I think it's a really interesting historical moment at the school, and I hope that comes across.

00:00:27:09 - 00:00:49:17

Etan Kinsella McLennan

Hello, I'm Etan and welcome to the second episode of our mini series for RCA 2024. If you're not aware, RCA 2024 is a series of exhibitions, events and activities presented by our amazing postgraduate students, and it is running across the summer this year. RCA 2024 is now in full swing. You might have attended the School of Arts and Humanities exhibition in June.

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Etan

It was an amazing exhibition across four days and thank you so much if you did attend, we hope you will join us for the next phase of the event. You are listening to our Dean's Downloads, where we'll be catching up with the Deans of our four schools at the RCA, finding out what their school has planned for the event.

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Etan

And for this chat, I was joined by Dr. Adrian Lahoud, who is Dean of the School of Architecture. We spoke on Zoom on a beautiful summer's day in June. This will be taking their work off site for RCA 2024. They are exhibiting in the Truman Brewery, which is a really lovely space in Shoreditch, in East London. If you joined us for RCA2023 last year, you may have come there and seen what our students were up to and there was work from our School of Architecture there.

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Etan

So you may have kind of gotten a sense of what they're all about. Please do come back and see RCA 2024 if that is the case. Their school has four programmes exhibiting. They are MA, Architecture, City Design, Environmental Architecture, and Interior Design. So there's something for everybody in there. Adrian chatted with me a bit about how those programmes

operate and the themes that they work within, and also about how the School is different perhaps from other architecture education based on the fact that it sits within an art and design college and how that informs the kinds of people who come to study with us as well as the what they go on to do

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Etan

next and the kinds of work that they produce while they're here with us. The event is taking place from Friday to Sunday, the 12th to the 14th of July. It's open from 12 to 5 p.m. on Friday with a later closing of 6 p.m. on the weekend. Last entry is half an hour before closing time, so please make sure you get in early.

00:02:40:00 - 00:03:00:13

Etan

This is a free event. You do not need to register, so just show up and if you want any more information, check out the show notes or check out more information on our website, on our social media. So anyway, let's see what Adrian has to say.

Adrian

Hi I'm Adrian Lahoud. I'm the Dean of the School of Architecture at the Royal College of Art.

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Etan

Adrian, thank you so much for joining me. We're really excited because it's approaching the School of Architecture's sharing of work, the exhibition for 2024 coming up in the Truman Brewery in East London. And we can't wait to see what they have in store. How have things been feeling in the School?

Adrian

Everyone's very excited. It's been really intense. So all of our exams have finished just last week.

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Adrian

We've got a couple more exams that'll take place during the exhibition, but we're on track to the second time we're showing at Truman Brewery, which is also terrific.

Etan

Can you give us a bit of an overview of what we should expect from this year's sharing?

Adrian

Yeah, sure. So the programmes that are showing we've got an Interior Design and that will be organised into three different platforms called Super Matter, Super Re-use and Super Futures, which looks at speculative design strategies, trying to understand what's coming at us in the next 30, 40, 50 years.

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Adrian

The MA City Design, which is organised into two platforms, one on border environments, which is looking at sort of border regime in Europe and challenges around migration and underground Palestine, which is looking at archeology, especially as a site of territorial struggle in Palestine. Then we have an environmental architecture which is also divided up into some three units as one looking at the Sahara and again, quite migrant related and looking at challenges around water in the Sahara.

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Adrian

Another project based in Alentejo in Portugal, which is looking at lithium extraction in Portugal and some of the challenges around environmental toxicity that are being produced by lithium extraction. And then a third studio called Anima, which is focused on Greece and island of Crete, and looking at some of the challenges they've been having with wildfire. And then I'm not going to list all of the studios in MA Architecture because there are 12 of them, but a couple of the a couple of ones that may be worth noting are Cooking Sections who run ADS3 are looking at post-industrial wetlands.

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Adrian

There's another studio looking at afterlives named 88, and that's looking at kind of the intergenerational land rights struggles. And then we also, for the first time, are exhibiting work from our school wide unit. So from the Media Studies programme, which teaches across the entire school and looks at different kinds of contemporary experimentation with non representational forms of media. There's quite a lot - 270 students exhibiting in total.

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Adrian

Yeah. Exhibition so far.

Etan

Yeah. It's really exciting. And how are those kinds of projects selected to be worked on?

Adrian

And yeah, so that's a really good question. So pedagogically, what drives the school is a series of research themes. So we have a research led teaching model. So for example, we have themes, a research theme that looks at climate justice.

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Adrian

Another one that looks at the relationship between architecture and social movements. Another one looks at institutional forms and practice and those research themes. And because we have a research led teaching model, really drive the studio brief. And so that really sets the content for each of the different studios. And there's a studio based model of teaching across the entire school and in Interior Design

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Adrian

they call them platforms, but it's effectively a small group tutorial of 12 to 12 to 14 students organised around research that's being developed by the tutorial leader. And that connection between the the, the research practice of the teacher and then the pedagogical direction of the studio is really important in the school.

Etan

Brilliant. Is there anything that stands out to you as being, I dunno, particularly exciting because it's a new approach or anything like that?

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Adrian

Yeah, I mean, this it's really tough because it's really always unfair to single out specific projects. But you know, one of the projects I was really fortunate enough to see during the examinations was a project by Max Cooper Clarke, which is really just one of the most extraordinary and moving things I've seen come out of the school for a long time.

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Adrian

And he was looking at this kind of project, exploring intersectional solidarity between queer communities and miners, and especially a procession of miners that has been involved in this annual event that walks from a small village called Nunhead, which has some of the highest levels of lead poisoning in the world in the UK through to Durham and all of the like cultural paraphernalia, banners, brass bands, etc. that are part of that really like now very, very long and important tradition of honour of moving through through this town.

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Adrian

And he intervened by creating a very, very beautiful and actually exquisite set of banners that talk about land contamination in the environment. And it was just about things and extraordinary projects. I'm really looking forward to see that. But there are 270 extraordinary projects. So that's just one of them.

Etan

Yeah, that's right. Am I correct in thinking that Max was recognised by RIBA?

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Adrian

He was last year. Yeah. Yeah. Brilliant thinking on that and kind of this breadth of work that is going to be on show. I think one of the things that sometimes is hard to grasp, especially for people who aren't, you know, in the world of architecture, is that like architecture as a study is quite different than like what people perceive as architecture sometimes.

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Etan

Like when I before I came to the UK, I saw architecture as buildings and actually it's so, so much more than that. And the students work so that people can expect to see is so beyond that.

Adrian

Yeah, I think that's that's really important. Obviously buildings are a really important part of what we do and in a way it's still at the core of what we do.

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Adrian

I think we have a much more expanded idea of what connects to buildings and what and what's important around buildings and in buildings. And so and there's a couple of reasons for that. One is, you know, we're not a School of Architecture in a built environment faculty or a planning faculty or an engineering technical university. We're a School of Architecture in an art and design college.

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Adrian

And so the students are working next to fashion designers and photographers and sculptors and textile designers and and so they've already given themselves permission, I think, to have an interest in having a proximity to the arts and culture in a broader sense. And that's something that we really embrace as a school. We love that about our, you know, the kind of opportunity being at the RCA affords.

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Adrian

So that means the space between artistic practice and architectural practice. And in the space, we really enjoy occupying the school. I think we do. We do that really well. But also the though the way the programmes are organised. So if you think about, you know, the Interiors programme is supposed to be about rooms, really, the Architecture programme traditionally is about buildings and the City Design programme is usually around neighbourhoods and blocks, the Environmental Architecture programme is around large scale landscapes and territories.

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Adrian

And so you have a what seems to be like a small to large family of programmes. But actually what you find is that the room, the building, the block and, you know, the city and the landscape are just entry points for students. And actually, once they work through that entry point, they're always really interested in exercising different kinds of perspectives and thinking about, you know, what does architecture look like from the perspective of a photographer or from a contemporary artist or from someone working in moving image.

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Adrian

And I think that kind of exchange of perspectives is really something that the RCA facilitates and I think we really encourage in the school because it actually means that the students are able to experiment and produce work that doesn't look like it comes out of any other institution.

Etan

And that's a really good description of it all. And thinking about that kind of cross/ interdisciplinary collaboration that our students might have with other students at the RCA, is that something that has come through in the work that we can see?

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Adrian

Yeah, that's, that's good. Yeah, that's absolutely. So there are there are always like ongoing discussions happening between - and some of them are formal. So for example, I know ADS9, which is one of the studios in the architecture that MA Architecture programme has had an ongoing collaboration with the Textiles programme, and that's because of the way they think about architecture actually relates to textile production and I think fascinating ways.

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Adrian

And so that's a that's a long standing formal relationship. But at an informal level, you know what, the students are bumping into people from other programmes in workshops and striking up conversations and having ideas about projects. And some of those projects might, you know, manifest during their studies, but they might also manifest in collaborations after they graduate.

Etan

Brilliant.

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Etan

Are there any sort of interactive components in the exhibition that we can expect?

Adrian

Yeah, I'm sure. I'm sure. So so one of the things that happened after COVID, as you know, is that, you know, architects and not just architects, interior designers, city designers tend to work with really big physical models. Post-pandemic, everyone started doing moving image work and it really astonished us because they were really good at it and it's not something we specifically give a lot of training in, and so we suddenly were just overwhelmed by incredibly high quality moving image work.

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Adrian

And it's quite interesting this year. So there's still a lot of work in that kind of moving image, interactive space. But we're also seeing students go back to more traditional strategies like using drawing, for example. So it's actually kind of moving into different directions this year, which I think is really fascinating. But the technology dimension is always really important for us.

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Etan

So what's the best way to navigate the exhibition?

Adrian

Yeah, so, so this exhibition, every year we work with a designer to help us design the exhibition. So this year's exhibition is designed by a tutor in the MA Interior Design programme called Steve Jensen, and the entire exhibition is made out of scaffolding as it's normal scaffolding you'd find on a construction site.

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Adrian

Now, it's because we wanted to reduce the amount of waste that came out of the exhibition to zero, if possible, because there's nothing worse. I mean, getting an environmentally conscious school with climate justice as as as one of its main research drivers to have skips full of trash, you know, which is which is sadly what happens at the end of most exhibitions.

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Adrian

And so we're working with with with scaffolding this year and Steve has designed a language of pavilions. And so each one of those studio groups that I mentioned before, they all get their own pavilion and it's kind of adaptable and they'll get to manipulate it and transform it so that it speaks to their particular research interests and it presents the work in the way that they want.

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Adrian

And so the entire space and treatment is filled with these pavilions. And so my suggestion would be to like, wander around them and find things that are interesting to you. And, you know, it's like listening to music. You might not like every song on an album, but hopefully they'll be a couple that resonate.

Etan

Absolutely. Yes. And what do you want people to take away from the experience?

00:15:16:22 - 00:15:46:00

Adrian

Yeah, that's a really good question. I hope they get a sense of the spirit of the school. And I think by that I mean that there is a very, very particular coming together of faculty and students right now in the School of Architecture that feels very alive and vital and committed. And so it's - I think it's a really interesting historical moment in the school, and I hope that comes across.

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Adrian

And it's also very clear this is a generation that are also really focusing on trying to imagine a better future for themselves. And that's probably a common thing amongst most students in the arts, except that they're doing it at a time of multiple crises. And so the reality of the world they're entering into is becoming more and more challenging in ways that were certainly not true

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Unknown

when I was studying, even though we probably had similar kinds of ambitions. And so that sense of seriousness of really trying to radically rethink the world that they're entering into, but that they've done so with a real sense of joy as well. And and I think for me, that's extremely important.

Etan

And thinking about previous years, are there any students who, you know, they started their projects at the RCA and after that kind of graduation moments, they really carried that project on and into their career.

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Adrian

Yeah, actually, that's something that's really common in the school, actually. And so one of the things that we've been really good at, as a school, is helping students to find their own voice. And even if their idea of practice is sitting, you know, in a slightly alternative space doesn't sit directly within the conventions of what you might expect to do when you graduate from one of our degree programmes.

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Adrian

But they've had the confidence and the skills and the networks to go out and establish themselves relatively quickly. And so, you know, I mean, for example, the last Venice Biennale of Architecture, I think 23 or 24 of the 90 people that were curated by the artistic director came from the School of Architecture and, you know, and and so you never know who's going to come to the exhibition.

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Adrian

And so it's a really incredible opportunity. It's the first public platform you get as a student and not just after, you know, a year or two years at the RCA, but after probably, you know, education starting at the age of four or five. So it's a culmination of a long stretch of education. So it's a really important moment for people as well, because it's really the moment where they start to define their own position and their own view on the world and and to make that position and that view public I think is extremely important.

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Etan

What are your hopes and aspirations for students in this moment, this exciting moment that is happening for them?

Adrian

Yeah, I think it also very much depends on the students and what they want because there are so many different kinds of things that you could do at the end of one of the degrees in the school.

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Adrian

And so as I said before, many of them might want to go out and start their own collective, which which many of our students have done. Some of them might just want a vibe a life and a good work life balance, which is also perfectly fine. And so I'd be looking for work opportunity that gives them not others might want to move into a parallel career,

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Adrian

you know, look at stage design or music production or theatre or moving image work on performance, the arts. All of these things are career paths that our students have entered into after and after graduating. Some of them I just want to work, you know, lead a design team in a big office. And so I think there are all these different opportunities that could come out of the education in the school.

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Adrian

I think, you know, I would be most proud if we facilitated that process for them. And I don't think we have a view on anything as one right way to practise. There are so many right ways to practise. And actually our job as an institution is to facilitate them. We need to help them find their own voice, and I think that's what we do really well.

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Adrian

And then the job of the show is to platform the kind of that that voice in a public space for the first time. So if we've managed to help them work out what they might do and, and maybe, maybe offer them - see that there are more possibilities out there than they might have imagined what practice could look like then.

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Adrian

Then I think I'll be really happy.

Etan

I think that's a perfect moment to finish this conversation and really looking forward to seeing what the students have in store for us.

Adrian

It's been a pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much Etan.

Etan

You've been listening to the RCA 2020 for Deans Downloads - a mini series as part of the Royal College of Art podcast for RCA2024

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Etan

RCA 2024. It runs from the 20th of June to the 4th of August across a selection of London locations. Find other episodes in the series as well as details of RCA 2024 in the show notes. Learn more about our programmes at rca.ac.uk, as well as finding news and events relating to the college and our application portal if you're interested in studying at the RCA.