

**The RAIC-AU Centre for Architecture Design Studio Program  
Interim Program Advisory Panel  
November 2009**

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**Overview:**

**The RAIC-AU Design Studio**

The design studio sequence at the RAIC Centre for Architecture at Athabasca University is based on a new model for design teaching, one for which little precedent exists in the programs of most schools of architecture.

## **How is design taught in most schools of architecture?**

In most schools of architecture, the design course is delivered in an open studio environment that at one time was regarded as a simulation of the kind of workplace that students could expect to encounter on graduation. In most design courses, students work independently and under the supervision of instructors and teaching assistants on architectural design projects that vary in length from several hours to several months; these projects are executed by students working either individually or in teams, and sometimes in teams where specific individual responsibilities have been defined.

In the traditional studio environment, constant exposure to one another's work and ideas develops a vibrant forum - and a culture - for ongoing critical discourse and debate. Learning and development occur on two levels: the first is more formal, in lectures, seminars and juried reviews of the work during and at the end of the project; the second is informal, in dialogues at the student's desk and in the hallways with professors and other advisors, teaching assistants, visiting critics and fellow students.

## **How does the RAIC-AU program differ from traditional schools of architecture?**

The RAIC Centre for Architecture at Athabasca University addresses similar pedagogical objectives but replaces the traditional studio with a Design Studio that interconnects online studies at AU with professional experience and mentorship in a Learning Office.

Every student in the RAIC-AU Centre for Architecture Program who intends to continue in the design studio sequence after the equivalent of the first year must be working full-time in an architectural office. This defines the path as alternate in relation to other schools, and preserves the connection between the new program and the apprenticeship model.

By formally integrating work and study, the RAIC-AU program develops the Learning Office as the student's primary studio experience. The Learning Office is the student's day-to-day workplace and becomes the active forum for both face-to-face and online dialogue with colleagues, advisors, fellow students and instructors.

The RAIC Centre for Architecture at Athabasca provides a fertile ground for each student's academic program by replacing the traditional university-based studio experience with a practice-based studio culture that is equally stimulating, supportive, and professionally current.

## **Definitions of key terms**

## **Design Studio**

the core design course that develops judgment, communication and design skills; the Studio has two main components: the Virtual Studio and Block Week

### **Virtual Studio**

the online component of the design studio

### **Block Studio**

the 5-day field workshop that provides the face-to-face component of the studio

## **Vertical Studio (in contrast to the traditional 'horizontal' studio)**

a design studio that groups students from different levels of the professional program

## **Instructor**

the faculty member responsible for the studio

## **Teaching Assistant (TA)**

an assistant, normally a graduate student, who works with the course instructor

## **Learning Office**

the professional architectural office where the RAIC-AU syllabus student is employed

## **Professional Advisor (PA)**

the licensed architect in the Learning Office assigned to the student

## **Teaching Group**

the ad hoc advisory committee of all PA's associated with a design studio

## **Crit (as in 'critique')**

the critical exchange where students present work to colleagues, teachers, and guest critics

## **In the RAIC-AU Design Studio proposal,**

Each student's studio experience is based in three different 'places'::

online in a virtual studio  
in a learning office  
in a week-long face-to-face block studio

Each student works on a regular basis with three kinds of teacher:

a studio instructor - online  
a professional advisor - in the office  
external critics - online, and in the office and block studio

**The following slides describe the main elements of the RAIC-AU Design Studio under two broad headings:**

1. Three learning sites:  
the virtual studio, the learning office, the block studio
2. Three kinds of teacher:  
the studio instructor, the professional advisor, external critics

## **Three Learning Sites:**

**1. The learning office**

1. accommodates experienced architects with the interest and skills to act as **Professional Advisors** – the roles of the Professional Advisor and the Learning Office are similar to those in place for the Intern Architect Program.
2. varies in size – 100 persons or 2 (including the student); the Learning Office includes architects who are members in good standing of their Provincial Association and engaged in contemporary practice in the process of making buildings.
3. is contractually accountable to the student and to Athabasca University; students enjoy access to clearly structured opportunities and mechanisms that allow them to evaluate the performance of the Professional Advisor and the Teaching Office.
4. provides appropriate online and hard-copy access to reference materials, core documents and other information resources.
5. may provide a leave of absence to students for the Block Studio, as well as scheduled release time during the final thesis project.
6. makes a commitment to the student(s) in their employ that ensures continuity in the event that the Office becomes unable to provide continuous employment while a design studio is underway

**Three Learning Sites:**

**2. The design studio**

1. is the core design course of the professional program; the Virtual Studio is the online component of the Design Studio and the primary site of interaction between the Instructor, students and Professional Advisors. **Students registered in advanced Studios (semesters 3-9) must be working in a recognized Learning Office.**
2. is paced and cohort-based, ie, all students registered in a given Studio follow the same schedule, starting and stopping at the same time, working with Instructors and Professional Advisors on similar projects, but in different locations. The online component of the studio provides opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous communication and real-time intervention by all parties in the documents submitted for consideration.
3. accommodates a maximum of **14 students** working with a single Instructor, which is consistent with CACB guidelines. Each student interacts on a regular basis with two persons: the Instructor (online) and the Professional Advisor (in the office), and maintains an e-portfolio that documents experience in both the TO and Studio.
4. involves as many as 14 and as few as 5 PA's (most Studios will probably involve 10-12 PA's). The Instructor and the PA's comprise the Teaching Group for that Studio, a resource group that may advise the Instructor on issues related to course content and administration, assessment, and so on.

**Three Learning Sites:**

**3. The block studio**

1. is a **5-day workshop** structured as a **hands-on** complement to the Design Studio; each student is required to attend at least one Block Studio per year, either in the fall or in the spring.
2. a separate group exercise that may involve site visits, workshops, design charettes, design-build projects, and external exercises associated with programs such as Habitat for Humanity. **Whenever possible, the Block Studio is designed to involve as many students as possible in an exercise based on engagement with the community.**
3. is coordinated by the Instructor with input from the Professional Advisors.
4. may accommodate students from more than one studio – it may be desirable to offer a Block Studio event that groups, for example, 4 studio cohorts (approximately 50 students), or more, depending on the program and the venue.
5. is located in **regional centres** such as Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal and Halifax to minimize travel costs for both students and AU.
6. is offered at least **twice per year**; the first, designed primarily for undergraduate students, takes place in mid to late fall; the second, for graduate students, is integrated within the annual RAIC Festival and may involve participation of Governor-General's and RAIC award winners.

**Three kinds of teacher:**

**1. The instructor**

1. holds a full or part-time **teaching appointment at AU**. The teaching activity of the Instructor is primarily an on-line exercise. On-line meetings between Instructors, students, and PA's occur on a weekly basis. The Instructor works with students across the country and is not (like the PA) geographically restricted. Class size will not normally exceed 14 students, and the Instructor is typically expected to spend 60 minutes per week with each student.
2. works with defined course objectives to deliver the curriculum and is **responsible** for the coordination of **all teaching-related activities** associated with the course, such as lectures and seminars, crits, grading, participation of guest critics, meetings with advisors and other students, and the Block Studio. The Instructor works with the Centre and the PA's on scheduling and programming for the Block Studio. Instructors may participate directly in Block Week, but are not expected to attend every workshop, or the entire program of a workshop.
3. synchronizes content and scheduling of the studio with other Centre course offerings. The Instructor also works with AU and all PA's to connect students' academic experience with the broader academic context.
4. coordinates the work of the Teaching Group, the ad hoc advisory council of all the PA's associated with a particular course.
5. works with AU's Student Support Services to facilitate student participation in external programs such as studios abroad and special field courses or workshops offered by other institutions.

**Three kinds of teacher:**

**2. The professional advisor**

1. is a registered architect in the Learning Office and is employed by AU under a contract that defines the roles and responsibilities of both the PA and the Learning Office. The PA works with a maximum of 3 students at a time and is typically expected to spend an average of 60 minutes per week with each student in course-related discussions.
2. works with each student to create an environment of teaching and learning. The PA defines the professional context, consults with the Instructor on course content and schedule, and acts as the student's external advisor. The PA may consult with AU on the scheduling and programming for the Block Studio and may assist students in preparations for the exercise. The PA may also, under certain circumstances, participate directly in all or part of a specific Block Studio.
3. works with AU to connect the academic experience of the student to the broad professional context, guiding the student in encounters with clients, consultants, municipal authorities, builders and other players in the design of the built environment. The PA adds local professional context to AU's national design curriculum and may, from time to time, involve colleagues and other experts in teaching and assessment activities, such as informal crits.
4. is a member of the *Teaching Group* for each course.
5. advises the student on participation in external programs. This could include, for example, assistance with preparations for the LEED™ and/or the Licensing Exam. (Note: the PA may have a significant role to play in the delivery of Professional Practice as well as other courses.)

**Three kinds of teacher:**

**3. External critics**

1. are drawn from both academic and professional contexts and enrich the teaching and studio experience. These individuals may interact with the student online, via the Design Studio, or in situ, in the Learning Office or in the Block Studio. External critics provide valuable input to the design studio sequence.
2. may include clients and consultants, builders, authorities having jurisdiction, and others. The roles played by these parties enrich the design studio experience and also the value of other courses, such as Professional Practice.
3. may be Professional Advisors who are active in other Design Studios.

## **In a nutshell, what is the RAIC-AU Design Studio?**

The RAIC-AU Design Studio is hands-on and studio-based. All students in levels 3 to 10 are working full-time in Learning Offices where they are challenged on a daily basis to explore the theoretical framework within which a critical and ethical professional practice must operate.

The structure of the Studio enables students to interact online with their Instructors, and in person in the Block Studio and with their Professional Advisors in the Learning Office. The RAIC-AU student's experience is therefore analogous to the experience of a student in a conventional program who deals with a studio professor one day and a senior TA the next or, as is the case in many schools at the final thesis level, with an internal and an external advisor.

Each student, at every level of the RAIC-AU program, works with at least two experienced professionals: the AU Instructor and the PA. This is the real strength of the distance-learning / work-study model, one of the defining elements of the RAIC-AU design program: the creation of a learning environment in which the nature and levels of support offered each student are not only appropriate but generous, and in addition, thoroughly engage the architectural profession in Canada.