

BACK PAGE FIRST: ALTERNATE MODELS OF ASSESSMENT IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE DESIGN STUDIOS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the enduring persistence of the design studio review model in landscape architecture education to commend democratic models of assessment that better serve learners and improve their conception of and approach to the design process. Despite significant societal changes and technological advancements that demand new pedagogies, the approach to core design studio reviews in landscape architecture schools has been slow to adapt to the classroom. Rooted in the Beaux Arts School tradition, this assessment model has been widely adopted across design disciplines, including art, architecture, and landscape architecture. This mode of assessment is transmitted from one generation to the next in landscape architecture schools, often without critical examination.

The expert panel, tasked with evaluating design projects in “the review,” brings focus on authority and inherent biases, and is often unaware of the assessment criteria of the course. Meanwhile, learners await the panel's approval, highlighting the power dynamics inherent in this hierarchical assessment model (Raisbeck, 2018).

Across institutions, the back page of studio syllabi describes the assessment model for the studio. While the means of assessment, format of final reviews, jury composition, and faculty deliberations differ, final review and grading criteria overdetermine the studio environment throughout the semester.

Beginning at the end, a panel of design academics will examine models from various schools through questions around the structure and format of their studio review, from the number of guest critics to the layout of learner work to the timing of presentations, to the criteria used to assess learners. This panel will flip the script to foreground final assessment in a studio and question how the final review is itself a form of assessment of the learner, instructor, studio, and the institution. The panel aims to identify alternative approaches to address the entrenched challenges associated with the “design review” assessment process.

Keywords

Landscape Architecture Design Pedagogy, Studio Assessment, Critical Discussion Frameworks, Learner-Centered Learning, Intentional Learning

1 INTRODUCTION

The final review is treated as the apotheosis of the semester's progress in the design studio, where the efforts of previous months culminate in a do-or-die event—learners meet their fate in front of a panel of reviewers and onlookers. The back page of the syllabus, a procedural section that departs from the syllabus' rules and plan to establish the terms of assessment via grades and academic integrity policy, often reads more as an administrative contract than a learning guide. This back page foreshadows another bookend—the final studio review, which doubles as a final reveal on process, progress, and performance. Anxiety is baked into this format, and before the first reviewer walks through the door, fears are heightened, heart rates are sped up, and (at worst) the classroom is conceived of as a battle line.

This paper seeks to improve the experience of that last classroom gathering for learners, instructors, and guests by exploring how they and the studio's host institution can introduce new pedagogical structures that provide the kind of feedback that invigorates all involved and thereby create a better learning and working community. Through a revisit of the final review to pursue alternative formats of final assessment, we hope to contribute to a revision—transformation, even—of how we assess learners in the landscape architecture design studio and initiate a broader discussion on *why* we assess. The objective of the panel and this paper are to ask how educators at different institutions fruitfully assess assessment; draw on exemplars to describe alternative methods of peer review that serve learners, instructors, and reviewers better than the “expert” model; consider pathways to improve the structure of the ubiquitous model of final reviews by experts; and encourage a broader conversation about the purpose and value of assessment in design pedagogy that prioritizes learner agency, active feedback, and classroom community.

Beginning at the end, a panel of design academics examined current models from various schools through a series of questions around the structure and format of their studio review, from the number of guest critics to the layout of learner work to the length of presentations to the criteria used to assess learners. We hope to flip the script and foreground how we assess work in the class' last encounter to question how the final review is itself a measure of how learners, instructors, studios, and institutions participate in creating successful outcomes for learning. Our highest aim is to identify alternative approaches that address the deeply entrenched challenges associated with the final review and to offer structures that facilitate deep listening and active learning.

To initiate a discussion, the 2025 CELA panel brought together educators from various institutions and used a discussion-based format to solicit feedback that expands the expectations and learning outcomes of the studio by compiling an inventory of the various roles and responsibilities of the learner, instructor, reviewer, and institution in the final studio review. In convening this discussion, we invoked this ideal of bell hooks: “The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994, p. 207). Our panel presentation and conversation—and this paper—champion learning methods that see the classroom, the studio, as a place of possibility; the final review, then, ought to expand our sense of ourselves rather than have us retreat into old stultifying habits.

The panel tried to open a dialogue that built on hooks' encouragement, asking what new forms of possibility there might be in our classrooms, and to begin a conversation about pedagogy that takes full account of the different mindsets in the studio environment: ours, our learners, and the interlocutors we invite to interact with us. (Thus our decision to insist on using “learners” rather than “students”; not that the latter is a dirty word, but the former feels more precise to us as a word that captures the range of thinking and action of that studio participant whose attention and growth is our top priority). The paper continues in that path by soliciting classroom-tested techniques that improve studio pedagogy; participant responses to four questions asked during the panel, as well as three methods of final review presented as case studies (or even provocations)—the expert, round robin, and stairwell review—create the arena for our observations and recommendations.

We offer active-learning tools and techniques that not only improve the final review, but ask how its transformation demands a reexamination of the pedagogy of the landscape architecture design studio and

those responsible for its success—or, alas, its failure. To that end, we commend a combination of pedagogy models, reliant on peer review and dynamic feedback, that demands an examination of our teaching, learning, research, and design practices.

1.1 Research Objectives

This study is guided by a dual agenda: To investigate the structure and effects of design studio assessment practices, and to articulate pedagogical values that support more equitable and reflective learning. The research objectives below reflect both critical inquiry and a commitment to learner-centered education.

This research examines how the final review, the most prominent and prevailing model of assessment in landscape architecture design studios, can better shape learning experiences and influence studio culture through creative yet rigorous reimagining. Our research brings to the surface crucial limitations of the conventional reviewer model organized around experts, and proposes alternative approaches that assess and foster learner agency, transparency, and critical dialogue.

The specific objectives are to:

- Identify the implicit and explicit biases embedded in conventional review structures and examine their effects on learner participation and experience.
- Investigate how traditional expert-based final reviews perpetuate hierarchical and exclusionary dynamics within design education, and to argue for increased use of alternative review modes.
- Evaluate the relationship between process-oriented and outcome-oriented assessment criteria.
- Propose democratic, learner-centered alternatives to the conventional final review that better support learning and encourage the agency and participation of learners.
- Encourage reflective teaching practices that critically examine the design and purpose of assessment itself.
- Encourage greater use of peer review to inform models of engagement and assessment for all participants in the design studio (or project-based seminar or workshop) final review.
- Ensure that feedback is central to evaluation, and actively integrate it in the review process.
- Insist on learning from the ideas, approaches, and models of inspiring instructors, generous interlocutors, and active learners.
- Promote the classroom community as a working community.

2 METHODS

2.1 Panel Format and Data Collection

This qualitative study draws on insights generated during a panel discussion at the 2025 Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA) conference. The panel brought together educators from multiple institutions to reflect on models of assessment in landscape architecture design studios, with a particular focus on the role and structure of final reviews.

The session was structured around four open-ended prompts. Responses were submitted anonymously via Miro, followed by a live discussion that encouraged elaboration and peer exchange. The four prompts were:

1. What are the biases reinforced during the final review? How do the existing models of design studio assessment reinforce patriarchal behaviors when expert panels are assembled, considering that these panels often bring a range of inherent biases and are frequently unaware of the nuanced assessment criteria of the course?
2. What is your assessment approach? What is your assessment approach, including: Do you give participation grades, and how do you define participation? What are the percentages and weights of assignments throughout the semester? Do you separate your assessment of representation

and design? Do you evaluate the process, or only the final product? Is the final review the primary means of assessment, or are learners graded on all submitted materials?

3. What is the role of the instructor? What is the role of the instructor in a review, how many guest critics do you typically invite, how do you decide who to invite; is there a stipend to compensate reviewers; and how is the physical setup organized; both in terms of room arrangement and the layout of each learner's materials during reviews?
4. What is the role of the learner? What is the role of the learner in a review; what are the expectations around them taking notes for their peers or attending reviews; and are there explicit guidelines around sharing their work?

These prompts were designed to elicit nuanced responses from a range of institutional perspectives, with an emphasis on surfacing both implicit norms and alternative practices.

2.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data to create a conceptual model that is used across disciplines, and is particularly helpful in identifying narrative themes. Thematic analysis identifies patterns in a data set (Naeem et al., 2023).

The analysis focused on recurring keywords, representative statements, and pedagogical concerns, which were grouped into five major themes:

1. Alternative review structures and best practices
2. Assessment transparency
3. Bias and subjectivity in assessment
4. Power dynamics in reviews
5. Relationship between process work and final product

This interpretive method enabled a grounded understanding of how assessment practices are currently implemented and critiqued in design studio settings. It also served as a foundation for identifying actionable shifts toward more democratic and inclusive models.

2.3 Case Study

To complement the participant-driven analysis, three alternative review models—The Round Robin, The Roving Consultant, and The Stairwell Review—are presented as case studies. These models are drawn from the authors' own pedagogical practices and serve as both reflective accounts and provocations.

Each case is examined through the roles of four key agents: the learner, the instructor, the studio, and the institution. This framework allows for a comparative understanding of how assessment structures can be reimagined to foster transparency, dialogue, and learner agency.

2.4 Figures and Tables

Table 1. A thematic analysis identified four themes in statements shared during the panel.

QUESTION 1: What are the biases reinforced during the final review?

Positive Approaches to Counter Biases

Approach	Keywords
I've had reviews begin with a conversation about what learners want to get out of the conversation/review	
Round robin reviews that make the process more conversational and informal and break down the hierarchy	Round robin reviews
Ask reviewers to take a few minutes to look at the learners' work in silence – walk around, observe, reflect – and insist they GET UP out of their chairs and engage with the work rather than always be at a distance	

Challenges & Biases Identified

Challenge	Keywords
Instead of engaging in a conversation work is evaluated based on superficial aesthetic judgments/personal preferences	Judgments/personal preferences
Difference in data collected on assessment when learners know it is confidential	Confidential
During my very first pin-up I was told my project was "everything that was wrong with contemporary architecture"	
Little dialogue – comments are generally from panel to learner	Little dialogue
learners don't feel like they are invited to participate in the conversation, or are relegated to the end of the conversation	Relegated
Reviewers sometimes need to appear the "expert" which can supersede being there for learners	Expert
Reviewers show up without reading the syllabus and make broad assumptions about the work and learning objectives	
It can be difficult for learners to make critical comments if they feel like they're being a narc about their colleague's work	Critical comments
Format of the room often sets up reviewers to be distanced from the work and the learner (sit down arms crossed)	Distanced from the work
Especially after zoom and COVID, there is a tendency for each reviewer to "hold court" by each stating their opinion and then moving on to the next, rather than engaging in a back and forth conversation	

QUESTION 2: What is your assessment approach?**Assessment Methods & Tools**

Approach	Keywords
Exit slip-evaluation rubrics	
learners need to give one compliment and critique for each learner	Critique
Instead of asking learners to offer critiques or feedback, encouraging learners to just ask questions	

Grading Structure & Philosophy

Approach	Keywords
3 elements that are graded – building grades through assignments of self and peer evaluations in which final is worth most – 35-40% of the grade	Self and peer evaluations
I do give participation grades, usually 20% of the total grade. But I do struggle to make this feel equitable and not subjective. Often it's largely based on attendance. I am trying to incorporate more ways to participate rather than speaking in class only, so that quieter learners also get credit through things like written or drawn responses to prompts in class. I also give grades through each phase of the class, 3-4 times per semester, so that the final review is only one of many assignments and weighs less on their grade	Participation
I believe that participation should be graded. Participation is typically assessed through attendance or by having group members evaluate each other's level of engagement. I consider both the process and the final outcome to be equally important. It is essential to prevent learners from focusing solely on results so that they can demonstrate their efforts even if they do not achieve a perfect outcome. Guiding learners to understand that their efforts throughout the process ultimately contribute to the final result is crucial. Additionally, in the age of AI, many learners tend to skip the thinking process and go straight to the final result. Therefore, grading process materials is also important.	Achieve a perfect outcome

Process vs. Assessment

Approach	Keywords
I consider both the process and the outcome to be equally important. It is essential to prevent learners from focusing solely on results so that they can demonstrate their efforts even if they do not achieve a perfect outcome. Guiding learners to understand that their efforts throughout the process ultimately contribute to the final result is crucial. In the age of AI, many learners tend to skip the thinking process and go straight to the final result. Therefore, grading process materials is also important.	Grading process materials

Approach	Keywords
I think process is important, especially because learning outcomes are sometimes more evident when you look at how a project has developed vs the final pinup itself	Process
Peer & Self-Assessment	
Approach	Keywords
learners are also one of the reviewers of the process and results. The goal is for them to learn from each other and provide objective evaluations. In fact, objective evaluation is challenging. Typically, the most popular learners receive the highest votes, but they may not necessarily be the ones who performed the best	Objective evaluation
Tend to evaluate peers truthfully – use more fine-tuned assessment of specific projects	
Assessment Challenges	
Challenge	Keywords
Participation can inflate the grade	Inflate
Difference in data collected on assessment when learners know it is confidential	Confidential
Expand the understanding of participation by ensuring it's not a reward for a certain disposition-- extroverts, talkers--and that active listening is valued as much as, if not more than, talking. Perhaps even drop the word "participation" due to its narrow associations and use, say, "engagement" as the rubric	
QUESTION 3: What is the role of the instructor?	
Instructor Responsibilities	
Approach	Keywords
My role as instructor is usually being time keeper and sharing closing comments for each learner, where I typically highlight the strengths of the learner that might have been overlooked by the reviewers so we end in a high note. (I need to get better at steering conversations away from negative, non-constructive feedback that some critics bring)	Role as Instructor
serve as moderator for the reviewer process. occasionally aiding to protect learners from harsh critiques or giving them constructive feedback when reviewers are not giving needed feedback	Harsh critiques
Do a brief read at the review's start to not only say what the learning goals and activities are, but also how the review fits in with the assessment and how reviewers can help with that	
Create an environment in the review and before the review that dissolves anxiety and make learners more able to focus on the conversations about their work. For example, have them hand in all the work or do their pin up the day before the review so that they get a good night's rest. Or, at the review, have learners introduce their peers' work	
Guest Critics & Compensation	
Practice	Keywords
We give stipends to visiting critics, and I typically invite 3-5 critics for review	Stipends
we offer food and parking permits - no stipends	
the clients, guest lecturers, non designers (faculty from other departments), design faculty (fine arts+LA)	
Review Format & Physical Setup	
Approach	Keywords
Typically, mid review is a classic pin up and final review is a more coordinated exhibition, so learners have the last week of the semester to curate their work. This can be set up as table of artifacts, hand outs, or more classic pin up work	
Usually at least one review is a round robin format. I've also started trying a silent review, where everyone circulates and writes feedback for each project, so that each learner gets as many as 10 people giving feedback on their work	Silent Review
Create visuals to advertise reviews, or make installations, or hallway poster displays	Create visuals
Challenges in Instructor Role	
Challenge	Keywords
Even as studio coordinator, there isn't always the control to choose all critics	Choose all critics

Challenge	Keywords
Sometimes the department chair invites people, or other full-time faculty who will be having learners the following semester are automatically invited. Often these are great additions to the conversation, but can also skew the conversation from what the instructor is trying to shape	
QUESTION 4: What is the role of the learner?	
Learner Engagement & Participation	
Approach	Keywords
I like having learners take notes for peers - it keeps them engaged and it also makes learners feel more like peers	
I think it's important for learners to share techniques	
Could we have learners also have a role where they set expectations and not just meet them? How might their expectations determine the structure of the studio and the final review?	
learners are doing peer reviews	
Instead of being "passive notetakers" who jot down the advice from those with authority, the learners could be "active notetakers" who record the ideas, themes, sensibilities, and new questions that emerge in a review	
digital learner assessment during reviews which is collected	
learners are encouraged to give feedback to one another. Sometimes I run it as a "snake review," where each learner reviews the learner pinned up to the left of them so that all learners give feedback at least once	
learners need to meet specific deliverables before they present	Specific deliverables
Challenges Related to Learner Roles	
Challenge	Keywords
Might it be that our practices privilege those that are extroverted? How to make room for the shy, the socially anxious?	



Figure 1. The Experts, Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps French, 1837 (Met Museum: Open Access)

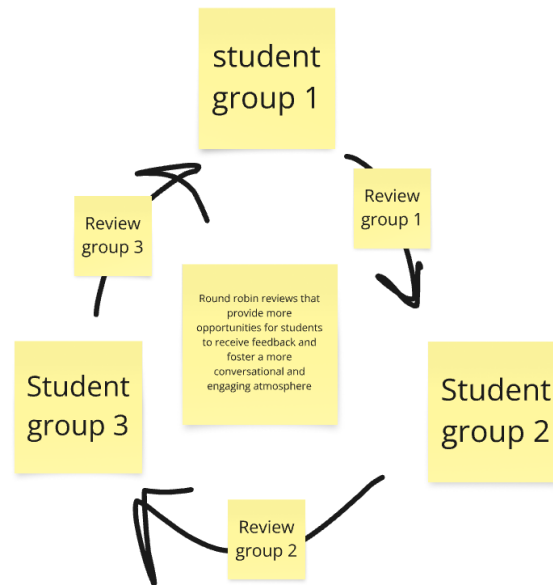


Figure 2. The Round Robin Review (2025). Diagram by the participants.



Figure 3. The Stairwell Review (2024). Photo by the author.

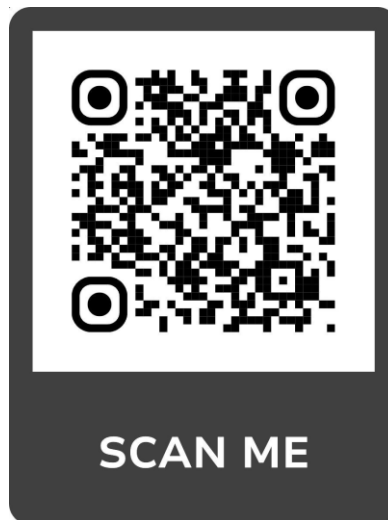


Figure 4: A QR Code links to the ongoing survey to collect additional responses to the four questions opened during CELA 2025.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Emergent Themes from Panel Responses

This section presents five key themes identified through thematic analysis of participant responses during the CELA 2025 panel. Each theme reflects shared challenges and alternative practices related to assessment in landscape architecture studios.

Five themes are described from keywords extracted from statements made on Miro during the panel. These statements, keywords, and themes are described in Table 1, and extracted below:

- **Alternative Review Structures and Best Practices:** Panelists described a range of alternative review structures and best practices beyond the typical expert review. Participants also identified the need to make sure that reviewers are briefed on the learning objectives and deliverables in the studio, and also find ways to advertise reviews to broader audiences in schools by creating posters.
- **Assessment Transparency:** Panelists described the importance of creating transparent assessment policies.
- **Bias and Subjectivity in Assessment:** Panelists identified different ways that bias and subjectivity are introduced into the assessment process, including
- **Power Dynamics in Reviews:** Panelists described a range of power dynamics that are present in the review process, including interpersonal relationships among reviewers, the format and setup of the review room, and the hierarchy between the reviewers and learners that put forth a critique-as-performance model instead of critique-as-dialogue.
- **Relationship between Process Work and Final Product:** Panelists described different approaches to evaluating process work as opposed to measuring learner success explicitly through the final product during the final review.

3.2 The Expert Model and Three Alternative Case Studies

The following three review formats are presented as case studies to formalize different types of review used in design schools in contrast to “The Expert,” the standard form of review practice that emerged out of the Beaux Arts School tradition. (“The experts” suggest a pedagogical model where mastery is through mimicking behaviors—it extends beyond the review moment to behaviors of loyalty, aspiration, and more). The first alternative review format, “The Round Robin,” places an emphasis on narrative building. The second, “The Roving Consultant,” the learner is empowered to engage with a range of reviewers who roam from table to table, extracting specialist knowledge for the advancement of their individual design projects. The third, “The Stairwell,” uses the physical space of the review to guide and solicit feedback directly to learners. Each case study is described and compared with regards to the role of the learner, the instructor, the studio, and the institution, the four most formative influences on the shape of the review.

This is not an exhaustive description of potential forms of review, but a call to action to diversify the forms of assessment used in core studios in landscape architecture, and to clarify the objectives for feedback and roles of the various individuals involved in assessing learner work.

3.2.1 The Expert

The expert review is the typical review format, a legacy of the Beaux Arts school tradition. In the expert review, learners are asked to present their work in front of an expert panel for a specified amount of time before critics share feedback.

The Learner: The learner presents the work they have produced in accordance with the syllabus. Work is pinned for display to the panel of reviewers, who sit in front of the standing learner. The learner presents for a set amount of time before receiving expert review feedback, which may include questions for the learner, relevant precedents from other practices and projects, and possibilities for further research and design.

The Instructor: The instructor may set expectations for learners, including taking notes for other learners, or setting a schedule for learners to respond to each other’s work. The role of the instructor varies in the expert model. In some cases, the instructor may act as another critic, evaluating what the project is

lacking or what has not been developed in the time between the last class meeting or last class review and the final review; alternately, the instructor may serve as timekeeper without participating in the discussion.

The Studio: The studio coordinator briefs visiting critics, introducing them to the studio syllabus. This briefing may include the learning objectives of the studio, and the expected deliverables. Critics who have longitudinal engagement in the studio and return after multiple years may see trends emerging in the work produced in the studio.

The Institution: There are assorted pressures on and from the institution with this review format (and was one of the more discussed topics in the audience discussion at the CELA panel). There might be pressure to invite reviewers from specific institutions. There might be pressure to defer to the institution's in-house reviewers, especially when they're senior faculty. There might be pressure on visiting critics/reviewers to perform since they are sometimes evaluated for jobs and other opportunities at the host institution. The assortment of pressures can create a "best in show" phenomenon among critics that derails the quality of feedback given to learners. And institutions' desire to show their best face might make it hard to resist the temptation to turn the final review into a display of their best and brightest, inviting comparisons to better or worse reviews or allowing the ranks of learners to become a recruiting pool for potential employees and visiting critics who can feel like stand-ins for firms.

The longstanding and broad use of this format allows it to be more flexible than one might think at first glance. Instructors and institutions have experimented with ways to inject it with changes that balance rigor and generosity and expand the role of its participants to ensure that learners have an enriching experience. This format, then, is not to be abandoned, discarded, or neglected—it's to be put under the illumination of other models that will make it a more democratic and supportive structure for learners, one that serves rather than works against them.

3.2.2 The Round Robin Review

Several participants in the panel discussion described using a Round Robin review method. In this method, learners are organized into pairs or small groups and assigned to a table or room, where each gathering is an occasion for learning via peer review (from learners not presenting in that round robin stage) and feedback from invited faculty and practitioners. Learners present their work in digital or printed format to a first set of assigned reviewers, then present again to a new set. Reviewers assume the responsibility of rotating between pairs of learners. Learners receive feedback from multiple critics, with an emphasis on improving their narrative for their consecutive presentation to the later set of interlocutors.

The Learner: The learner is an active participant in the Round Robin review. The learner is responsible for sharing their work in a narrative format that is accessible, and for reworking their presentation between feedback sessions. Each encounter is an opportunity for feedback to build on prior engagement as opposed to the too-frequent habit of reviewers vying for center stage or engaging with each other much more than with the work and preoccupations of learners.

The Instructor: In the Round Robin review, the instructor is the facilitator. The instructor invites guest critics to join, and briefs the reviewers about the learning objectives for the studio, as well as the intention of the Round Robin review, which is to focus on narrative and presentation skills. The instructor assumes responsibility for pairing or grouping learners to present together, and pairing or grouping reviewers with each other and with learners for a productive conversation.

The Studio: The Round Robin is a test of a studio brief. In this review format where narrative and presentation are emphasized, the drawings and deliverables become secondary to the story that learners tell to link their drawings.

The Institution: The institution may facilitate the Round Robin review by providing resources, including stipends for visiting critics. The Round Robin format requires a larger number of jurors than an Expert panel, and a greater degree of flexibility. A stipend or other compensation for reviewers' time is necessary.

Because feedback is received in a smaller group, where reviewers are engaged in a more intimate conversation with the learners—and, let's say it out loud, where the temptation to perform and pontificate is less—the classroom becomes an iterative and generous workspace and, at its best, an interactive

working community. The review therefore reminds learners to prize conversation above performance, community above individual brilliance, active learning over passive reception—and progress as inextricably linked to process.

3.2.3 The Roving Consultant

The Roving Consultant method reverses the power relationship between learner and reviewer. The learner is empowered to engage with a range of reviewers, each of whom brings a distinct set of expertise to the table for dialogue on individual projects. The room is configured as a dispersed set of consultation rooms. The learners position themselves in pairs per table, and situate themselves on one side of the table. The roving consultant moves from one table to the next, where the learners ask specific questions related to their project, targeting specific attributes of their projects that relate to the consultant's expertise.

The Learner: With this approach, the learner is empowered with the authority over their projects. The learner shares specific elements of the design project aligned with specific consultants for diagnosis through direct questions seeking expert advice. The learner mimics the role of project leadership that a designer would take in practice when seeking advice from diverse project consultants.

The Instructor: Prior to the review, the instructor takes the role of curator, selecting and coordinating various experts whose knowledge relates to the broader objectives of the design studio curriculum. The curation needs to take into account the individual learner projects, identifying a specific set of expertise and the agency for the projects within the studio as a whole. During the review, the instructor's role changes. They take on a dual role: as facilitator who keeps time as reviewers move from one table to the next, ensuring equitable time distribution across the projects, and also as a consultant with a specific set of expertise relevant to the project. This approach enables learners to ask direct questions to all visitors and instructors in the review environment.

The Studio: The studio in this review approach functions as a set of consultation suites. The session is facilitated when learners have a level of familiarity and comfort with the studio brief and their individual projects. The project drawings serve as active agents for the conversation, the drawings are not precious at this stage but are collectively drawn on and spoken through as answers for targeted questions are discussed.

The Institution: The institution as a broader suite of knowledge areas, schools, and departments is acknowledged in this format, drawing expertise from across the university or across institutions. This approach expands traditional knowledge areas of the discipline, bringing a unique set of expertise to the room for the specificity of the design studio.

This approach acknowledges the need for an expanded set of knowledge areas that are unique to the studio and beyond what might be traditionally demarcated as the skills sets required by the education standards associated with the discipline's accrediting body. It acknowledges multi-sited ways of seeing and knowing in the world.

3.2.4 The Stairwell Review

The final review of the course *The Perception of Found Landscapes: In Stillness and Motion* takes the form of a co-curated exhibition, with contributions from both learners and the instructor. The course explores how motion and stillness—both bodily and cinematic—can reveal spatial and temporal dimensions often overlooked by conventional design methodologies. Progress pinups throughout the semester are conceived as methodological extensions of this inquiry, with works collaboratively selected, arranged, and exhibited in unexpected locations—sites that themselves become found landscapes.

For the final review, the stairwell of an academic building is selected as the exhibition site. The space is curated around six thematic sections, each occupying a landing on a different floor, transforming the stairwell from a passageway into a place of lingering and reflection. Reviewers, drawn from a range of professional and disciplinary backgrounds, are invited in numbers that exceed the learner cohort. Learners walk with reviewers through the exhibition at their own pace and in their own sequence. Each learner engages with their work in the context of a broader curatorial dialogue, allowing every walk-through to unfold as a distinct spatial and interpretive narrative and social relation.

The Learner: The learner is repositioned as a co-curator and spatial narrator rather than a conventional presenter and recipient of expert opinion. Over the course of the semester, learners develop their own research while learning to situate individual contributions within collective frameworks.

The Instructor: The instructor produces work alongside the learners, while also facilitating the process by designing the conceptual scaffolding of the course and supporting learners in their curatorial and representational decisions. Serving as a collaborator more than evaluator, the instructor helps identify thematic relationships, spatial rhythms, and emergent ideas across the body of work.

The Studio: The studio functions as a methodological testing ground—part laboratory, part gallery, part field site. It integrates media-based research, theoretical discourse, and spatial experimentation. The studio culture encourages a non-hierarchical, exploratory environment where critique is distributed across time and space, rather than concentrated in a single review moment.

The Institution: The institution affirms the value of alternative assessment models by supporting non-traditional review formats. The use of the stairwell—a peripheral, circulatory space—as the site of exhibition reflects a broader institutional willingness to rethink how and where and when learning takes place. Rather than using the final review to project institutional reputation, the institution allows its physical site to become a dynamic classroom where instructors, learners, reviewers, and visitors are invited to be democratic subjects.

By relocating the final review to the stairwell, this approach challenges the hierarchical structure of conventional critique. Assessment shifts from defending a finished product to articulating how the work is positioned, contextualized, and narrated within a broader curatorial and spatial framework. This format invites multiple interpretations, fosters interdisciplinary exchange, prompts peer review and support, and foregrounds the shared interpretive agency of learners and reviewers.

4 DISCUSSION

To think about the role of the instructor is to think about what it means to be the student's advocate. How we help them learn; help them bring their whole selves to a classroom (or at least not uncomfortably put away important sides of themselves); help them grow in their imaginations; help them find the trust and confidence they require to grow; help them tackle difficulty (as we provide them with the resources to do so); help create the sensibility—collaboration, openness to diversity and risk—that brings them closer to their potential; help them see their promise and limitations and mistakes and abilities through cogent and transparent feedback; help foster more equitable outcomes for them through responsible ways of mediating between them and the inside world of the institution, and them and the outside world of the profession and various spheres of engagement. That is, to think about the role of the instructor—or critic or institution—is to think about the needs and role of the student.

These reflections are echoed in the findings from our thematic analysis and the alternative models shared in this study. The five emergent themes—particularly those around assessment transparency, bias, and power dynamics—point to a disconnect between the goals of learning and the prevailing structures of assessment. The expert panel model, deeply embedded in design pedagogy, often centers performance, institutional tradition, and authority over process, dialogue, and care. A key consequence is the anxiety students feel—not only from presenting work but from entering an evaluative space that may misunderstand or misrepresent their efforts and intentions.

The three case studies—Round Robin, Roving Consultant, and Stairwell Review—illustrate concrete ways to reimagine assessment as a relational, student-centered practice. These models aim to shift focus from a singular moment of judgment to an ongoing dialogue of engagement. They reposition instructors as co-curators and critics as contributors rather than arbiters, challenging the inherited ritual of the final review.

Yet these shifts are not without their tensions. Institutional pressures often reinforce the spectacle of the “best in show,” where critics perform authority and students brace for high-stakes commentary. Even peer-led or silent reviews carry risks—of unequal participation, performative equity, or diminished feedback clarity. The challenge, then, is not only to redesign formats, but to rethink the cultural expectations that underlie them.

This points to the need for further research—not only into formats but into how responsibilities and expectations are distributed and enacted across the roles of learner, instructor, studio, and institution. Future work might explore how these roles evolve across different institutional contexts, or how assessment can better scaffold student agency and accountability over time. One particularly promising direction lies in shifting feedback not just across roles but across channels—for instance, through student-led surveys and self-assessments shared with instructors and institutions. These approaches would move beyond the current educator-driven cycle of reflection and invite students themselves to co-create the conditions and critiques of learning culture.

Assessment of the design project in landscape architecture programs can shift to be grounded in the origins of constructivist learning theory (Kozulin, 2013), where knowledge is actively constructed through experience rather than passively received. Design assessment evaluates both process and product, recognizing the iterative nature of learning design. Reflection-in-action (Schön, 1985) is central, as assessment prompts students to critically analyze their decisions. Assessment also embraces the studio pedagogy model, where dialogue between instructor and learner creates a cognitive learning period. Assessment serves as both an evaluative and formative tool, supporting learning while measuring achievement. This argues for a shift to a learning model that centers on conversations between multiple actors through which participants are enculturated into a community of practice (Mewburn, 2013). In this model, the culture of the community's learning environment plays an important role in the cognitive development of the learner, the design student.

The final review should not be viewed as a period of harsh judgment or ranking, but rather held as a moment of shared learning amongst a community where the learners are actively engaged in understanding and a process of positioning themselves within landscape architecture while contributing to the future development of the discipline (Van Dooren, 2018).

5 CONCLUSION

This is a preliminary body of research where we pose that the review, we argue, should be a moment of shared authorship. It should foreground process over performance, conversation and collaboration over competition, co-learning over pronouncement. Alternative formats that prize learner agency and peer review, such as the Round Robin, the Roving Consultant, and the Stairwell Review, demonstrate that such a shift is not only possible but already underway in many classrooms. To change the review is to change more than format—it is to challenge the assumptions that have long defined design education. It asks us to reconsider who assessment is for, what it values, and how it might better support the intellectual, emotional, and social development of students.

Assessment in the design studio has long been treated as an endpoint—a ritual of performance and critique that too often prioritizes authority over learning. This paper challenges that tradition, not by rejecting assessment, but by reframing it as a pedagogical practice shaped by relationships, responsibilities, and values.

The path forward will require institutional support, critical experimentation, and—perhaps most importantly—a willingness to let go of inherited habits. In doing so, we open space for a more inclusive, reflective, and generous culture of learning. The question is no longer whether we should revise the final review. The question, and asked with urgency, is: What kind of learning culture do we want it to produce? And how might learners, instructors, interlocutors, and institutions help usher in that culture? The ability to effect a shift is not equal among those agents; institutions carry disproportionate influence, not to mention responsibility, to change the structures of learning, and the proper support and advocacy from them are necessary for the change we advocate. Pedagogical change needs institutional change—and support. The shifts in learning culture will come from shifts in department culture. And, as David Gooblar writes, “Key to changing department culture are department chairs, who have a lot of power to influence the relative importance of teaching to a department’s customary operation. In disciplines with a traditionally heavy emphasis on brilliance or logistical rigor, chairs can work to make this often unspoken value apparent, discussing with faculty members the department’s desire to break out of counterproductive traditional practices.” (Gooblar 2025, 224).

"We too often, and often unconsciously, commit ourselves to values other than the learning of all students," David Gooblar warns. "Brilliance, logistical rigor, selection, the way our professors taught: whenever we worship these false idols, we end up rewarding something other than how much a student has learned in our course. And then we very often reinforce all the inequality that haunts our society and institutions." (Gooblar 2025, 191). If assessment and feedback is a reflection of our values, then what responsibilities do we, as educators and institutions, have to shape it? What kind of pedagogical culture might emerge if we design reviews not around judgement, but around curiosity, collaboration, and care? How we assess and why we assess ought to keep our learners at the center of our concerns and efforts, and put them in a position to grow and succeed. Only educators, administrators, and interlocutors committed to institutional and pedagogical change will help realize this. All of them working in concert with learners can begin to reimagine the design studio as a place of possibility and freedom where participants are invited to listen, learn, and even thrive. We resoundingly agree with David Gooblar (Gooblar 2025, 192): "As simple as it is, we need to continually subject our pedagogical choices to a fundamental question: Does this contribute to the goal of helping every student learn?"

This preliminary research documents educators' concerns about traditional studio reviews and presents three alternative models using four possible frameworks. The continuation of this research aims to systematically evaluate learning outcomes, longitudinal impacts, institutional constraints, scalability, and student perspectives to determine whether alternative assessments are effective models.

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