Book Review:

Studio Properties: A Field Guide to Design Education

# Derek Jones, James Benedict Brown, Elizabeth Boling, James Corazzo, Colin M. Gray and Nicole Lotz (2025), Bloomsbury Visual Arts, UK

# Reviewed by Lyndon Buck, Franziska Conrad and Gary Underwood, University of Southampton, UK

There is something special about a studio as a place of practice and learning, and *Studio Properties* seeks to be a field guide to the design studio in education, presenting a single reference source for research and scholarship in this area. The authors explain that the *Studio Properties* project, and the *Studio Matters* project before it, were motivated by the absence of a comprehensive reference text of scholarship on studio pedagogy aimed at scholars and educators. Theoretical works and teaching guides exist but tend to focus on certain aspects of the studio and no single text brings these ideas together under the idea of *Studio*. It aims to allow educators and researchers to quickly find and directly apply content to their own disciplines and contexts.

In this non-linear book, six authors from various design disciplines explore aspects of studio education, citing 700+ articles, books, and other pieces of writing, with the references section accounting for nearly 10% of the book. The components of studio are broken down into individual properties, with descriptions and research references to help explain the relationships between properties. Studio teaching is undoubtedly different and special, it’s a particular place and pedagogy that operates in a distinct way, and the authors here have presented studio as a series of 57 interconnected properties, rather than attempt to provide a definition. The book does not define studio, and it doesn’t intend to, so those looking for a template or guidebook on studio teaching may be disappointed.

The authors liken the book to a combination of a wiki, a field guide, and a pattern language, which enables readers to navigate between the whole and its parts and understand the interconnections between the properties. The book comprises *properties*, *clusters*, and *narratives*. The 57 *properties* describe things, events, interactions, or experiences in studio education. The 9 *clusters* are groups of properties that are thematically related. 2 *narratives* offer a first-person account of studio, with a view to provide insight into how properties interrelate, overlap and depend on one another. The book has an unconventional structure; it uses the clusters as chapters, and it isn’t linear, using the 57 properties clustered thematically to describe the studio experience. Each property references multiple other properties, creating a web of patterns but also making reading the book for reviewing quite a challenge. It is interesting to read on the *Studio Properties* website that there were over 100 properties considered over the book’s gestation, so there has been a fair amount of editing to get this far.

Each of the 9 *clusters* is densely packed with theoretical and practical insights into studio teaching and the developmental journey of students immersed in studio practice. Together, the clusters map the visible places, working practices, and emerging selves of studio life. Their scholarship is impressive, yet their accessibility varies and may feel unsuitable to readers seeking clear-cut guidance on studio support or, from a student perspective, navigational cues. There is no defined order or preferred linear path through the clusters, but for the purposes of this review they were split into 3 sections of 3 clusters per reviewer.

*Visibilities & Proximities* describes the studio as a room with “no obvious front” where artefacts, people and ideas circulate freely. For students this cluster provides orientation points: the diagrams of public/private zones and informal learning niches explain why sketchbooks sometimes end up on walls and why critique often happens in corridors. Educators will read the same pages as a reminder of lived studio experience, both as teachers and, likely, as former students themselves. The argument is vivid and well-illustrated; only its rapid cross-referencing to other properties, and at times densely written text, risks disorienting newcomers.

*Foundations & Methods* shifts the focus more toward design educators. Its six properties, *Apprenticeship*, *Design Brief*, *Active Teaching*, *Feedback*, *Critique* and *Reflection*, supply studio tutors with critical lenses. The apprenticeship section, for example, unpacks how the master–novice bond doubles as a “socio-economic model” that can entrench power not necessarily in tune with current learning practices. Likewise, the design brief is recast as “combustible fuel” that sparks, rather than contains, creative inquiry. Students will still glean practical tips on crit formats or brief types, but the heavy theorising can feel more like a literature review rather than a guide to studio practice.

*Expertise & Identity* reconnects both main audiences by reframing mastery as a relational journey, “not a static state” but a constellation of competences measured against social reference points. For students this becomes a growth map: moving from novice to competent designer is shown as iterative and personal. Educators gain a diagnostic vocabulary: character, judgement and performance replace mentoring and assessment. The section’s critique of monolithic expert/novice binaries is timely, though examples drawn from non-Western studios would have strengthened its claim to universality.

*Time & Structures* highlights how immersion, rhythms, and project cycles shape learning. The interplay of synchronicity and proximity - whether physical or digital - reveals the nuanced dynamics of studio learning environments and highlights the pressures design departments face in justifying the expense of such resources. Importantly, the authors critique assumptions around presenteeism and uniformity, advocating for flexible, inclusive approaches that accommodate diverse student circumstances. The theme of rhythms - of both students and educators - is particularly well addressed and offers a reminder of how easily this crucial and complex factor can be overlooked.

*Artefacts and Making* foregrounds the centrality of learning by doing, where making, prototyping, and play are not just activities but pedagogical tools. Artefacts emerge as boundary objects, mediating dialogue, reflection, and assessment. The authors also highlight the nuanced interplay between embodiment, intention, and context, and studio is framed as a dynamic site of experiential knowledge construction. Given the central role of physical and digital artefacts to studio, this chapter feels like it would benefit from additional content. For example, one element which is perhaps over-looked is the crucial role played by the teaching of practical and digital skills in enabling students to explore, make and communicate through their work.

***Interactions and Sociality*** defines the studio as a collective space where learning is relational and dialogic. Listening-in, social networks, and confidence to speak are shown to be vital mechanisms for participation, identity formation, and professional development. The role of artefact-centred communication is highlighted and there is a pertinent reminder to educators to be mindful in the vocabulary they use in studio. The discussions on belonging and social comparison factors are also particularly enlightening and thought-provoking, and the book perhaps underplays the role of social media in this context.

***Atmospheres and Place*** highlights the sense of belonging in studios and safe space is key to the concept of place and participants are key to placemaking. It is clear that a sense of belonging can affect positively affect wellbeing, motivation and engagement and it would be interesting to see some examples of how this has been achieved in various discipline specific situations. This cluster makes clear that emotions can have a significant impact on learning and staff- student relationships, and personal and creative transformation is an emotional process. Studio influences mental and physical wellbeing, those of us who have worked in studios will all have positive and negative experiences that we could share, and it would be interesting to see more of these shared. Informalities such as informal discussions and serendipity can create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere but these can also disenfranchise those who do not feel part of the studio culture. The cluster ends with a discussion on uncertainty and ambiguity - fundamental to design education but also one of the key stress raisers with students, especially in their early years of study.

***Theories and Knowledge*** points out that creativity is assumed to be ubiquitous in studio environments but that this is sensitive to conditions and contexts. Risk and failure are necessary and central to creativity and learning from failure and risk taking requires certain conditions in studio, such as an open and playful atmosphere, adequate time, and opportunities to assess own performance. Risk and failure can develop capacities, attitudes, and resilience, this is all demonstrably true but there is little guidance about how this can be achieved while maintaining a creative and welcoming place. Educational studios aim to replicate or simulate those in professional practice yet with different pressures, with assessments and crits in studios rather than commercial or professional constraints. There is some discussion around discipline – with most studios being discipline specific or uni-disciplinary, with some studios working as multi-/inter-/trans-disciplinary and working across disciplinary boundaries in studio, but there could have been some specific examples of how these can work, and potential pitfalls of stepping outside of a single discipline per space. This cluster also discusses and defines some general education concepts and theories such as constructivism, experiential learning, threshold concepts, cognitive apprenticeships, communities of practice, problem-based learning, and project-based learning which could be useful for readers new to education. Finally, it looks at knowledge and knowing, with design knowledge taking varied forms such as precedent, intermediate-level, experiential and embodied, and tacit knowledge, and design knowledge also exists in things found in and around the studio. The authors point out that design knowledge is socio-political, and western design canon and biases exist in most literature around studio practices. This cluster ends with a discussion on the de-centring of western traditions to allow other forms of knowledge to be seen as relevant to studio practices.

***Culture(s) and Power*** is the final cluster in the book where activities, spaces and interactions - the culture of studio - are discussed, and the issue of these often being pre-structured for the students so that it can be difficult for them to imagine how they might participate in shaping the culture and purpose of studio. Habits and rituals, contexts, beliefs, attitudes and norms, arrangements and choreographed interactions all form part of studio culture, and these can lead to a means of control or an unwritten way of controlling behaviours. There may be a hidden curriculum - knowledge and practices that students learn and incorporate into their praxis without being explicitly taught - such as studio crits.

Critical pedagogy is discussed again here, with design studio practice not being a universal approach, but developed initially by European schools and thus embodies European values and definitions of what design is and what a designer could/should be. The authors ask what new knowledge, practices, and ways of being could studio educators value as they co-construct curricula with students of diverse backgrounds? The cluster ends by considering the studio power transaction – the asymmetrical power distribution, the structured environment with formal rules and implicit and explicit structures, and how this is defined by social, historical and cultural power and how these in turn influence studio experiences and curricula. Enculturation, acculturation, and indoctrination are discussed as well as studio practices act as a means of controlling entry to a discipline, showcasing acceptable studio culture, and as a way of learning the language of a discipline through ritualised transactions such as the desk crit.

***Narratives*** is the final part of the book if it is treated as a linear read, and this consists of 2 narratives without further explanation. In some ways, these work as a useful introduction to the language and structure of the book, and perhaps they should be read first, although they are perhaps a little crudely drawn. It isn’t clear whether these are fictional or based on real experience, and at times they have overly detailed descriptions of the contexts but it is useful to see one narrative based on traditional studio teaching, and one on hybrid, and the challenges and benefits of each. It would certainly be interesting to read more of these from a more widely drawn circle of design educators, perhaps including school design educators.

Across the *clusters* the tone is scholarly yet personable, providing a balanced view of positives and negatives of studio practice, pointing out the difference that both online and offline studio environments can make to the visibility, motivation and engagement of different characters, students and educators alike. Praise is consistently paired with self-questioning, for example the defence of critique is followed by warnings about judgement eclipsing exploration. There is an acute awareness of the ongoing limitation of cultural diversity in design and the negative impact that can have on a student’s design journey. This dialogue approach keeps the reader engaged; however, citation strings, foot-noted cross-links and nested definitions are likely to overwhelm less experienced readers, especially students, who may lack studio learning as well as design and educational experience. Novice designers will find some *clusters* digestible, some more theoretical, and a few potentially motivational. Educators, curriculum leads and researchers, meanwhile, could potentially receive a well-stocked critical toolkit from the complete 9 *clusters*. The book’s ambition, to be both primer and provocation, is largely met, but newcomers may need more specific case studies to unlock its full potential.

While the structure and sub-headings offer a clear breakdown of the themes and reflect the breadth of the content well, the layout of the book can sometimes be distracting. The constant cross-referencing of words and page numbers can be off-putting and some of the diagrams add limited value. However, the tone of the book is approachable and thought-provoking, highlighting the complexity and depth of studios within a design context. Learning in studio is not linear or isolated but iterative, embodied, and deeply relational. It challenges reductive views of design education and offers a rich framework for understanding studio as a transformative space where knowledge, identity, and community are continuously negotiated and redefined.

The elephant in the studio is that this is not a field guide – generally a book for the identification of animals, birds, or flowers in their natural environment. It aims to be a practical and academic text - practical in that it addresses the reality of being an educator or student in studio, academic in that it is informed by relevant, rigorous scholarship and research but it reads as much more of an academic than a practical one. This may limit its relevance to students and those starting out on their studio journeys. Each time a property is mentioned it is highlighted in the text with page numbers to aim navigation, but this can be very distracting. There are maps and figures but no images - these add little to the understanding of the text, and some images of studio environments to give context would really help at times, such as when discussing the Importance of artful surfaces and personal workspaces and the act of gathering to positive student agency in studio.

The *Studio Properties* will continue beyond this as an online resource where audience participation is encouraged. Those interested in exploring, developing, or thinking about studio properties and practices are asked to get in touch with the authors. By expanding the range and scope of the examples and narratives of studio and incorporating some compelling visual content of studio environments across various educational settings, the authors should be able to maintain the momentum of exploration into the design studio that this book has started.

***Studio Properties: A Field Guide to Design Education*** is published by Bloomsbury Visual Arts and is also available as open access under a Creative Commons international licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) funded by the Open University and is supported by additional online resources at https://studioproperties.org/ including upcoming events (autumn 2025) and articles.