

# **BAS Programme Evaluation**

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**BERGEN 2021**

# INTRODUCTION

As the Programme Evaluation Committee we have been invited by BAS to ‘...carry out a general evaluation of programme quality at BAS focusing on the school’s overall academic and pedagogical approach and culture’<sup>1</sup> We have interpreted this to form the aim of this discussion document: given its rich history, ethos and current characteristics, how might there be a ‘better BAS’ in the future?

The Programme Evaluation Committee is made of five members: Bjørn Otto Braaten, Bernice Donszelmann, Anders Johansson, Hege Kongshaug and Marianne Skjulhaug. As well as relevant professional and academic experience we have all had direct experience of BAS variously as teachers, examiners and even former Rectors.

To undertake the task BAS has provided us with comprehensive material: Programme Descriptions as well detailed Course Descriptions for all levels of the course, Strategic Plans, formal frameworks, self-evaluation documents, documentation of student work and assessment, et al. In addition to familiarizing ourselves with this material, our method has been very discussion-based. We have met regularly as a group to discuss our progress and perceptions, we have participated in several of this year’s Didactic Salons and, importantly, we have also undertaken a series of meetings with BAS teachers, current students and alumni which gave us the opportunity to raise questions and get feedback on the participants perceptions of the school, its characteristics, strengths and weaknesses.

We have divided our report up into seven chapters largely based on issues and questions that arose from our meetings with the students and teachers. They delineate key areas that we feel are central to the ethos of BAS as an architecture school presently and to its future. Each section is divided into three sections: a descriptive point of departure on the subject, its history, a ‘Discussion’ section which raises (sometimes conflicting) points on each key area and a set of key questions that we pose to the school for future consideration.

Rather than a conclusive statement, this report was used initially as a *discussion document* that formed the basis of the seminar that we led as part of the BAS Teacher’s Seminar in August, 2021. Further questions, contradictions and issues arose through these discussions that were taken into account in this final Programme Evaluation. A section on ‘Research’ was added and points made by the BAS teaching team during seminar discussions have been incorporated into the ‘Discussion’ sections. Both during the Teachers Seminar and following it, our aim for this document is that it opens up consideration of new aspects and perspectives on BAS as an architecture school.

In the following we suggest seven key concerns. We believe these to be the most important issues to consider in the process of developing BAS in the future.

- The alternative profile
- Open Form
- DAV
- Sustainability and the regional perspective
- Learning
- The community

- Research

## to begin with...the BASic identity factors

When BAS started up as a private foundation in 1986 it was profiled as an alternative architectural education to the two existing schools in Norway (NTH / Trondheim and AHO /Oslo). For 18 years prior to this, starting in 1968, courses in Bergen and the surrounding area had been led by Svein Hatløy (first rector of BAS).

From the *BAS-alternativet* (1999)<sup>2</sup> the basic identity factors are characterized as:

1. *A solid orientation and identity based on the cultural and geographical context of the Norwegian West -Coast and at the same time internationally oriented towards related architectural and educational initiatives across the North Sea.*<sup>3</sup>
2. *Open Form- methodology for developing an inclusive architecture where the architect's role, in a common process for physical environmental change, is central.*
3. *Fieldwork, 1:1 sketching, hands-on learning, acknowledging the importance of concrete experience of place, people and built environment.*
4. *DAV (Den Andre Verda - meaning 'the other world')) as a way of learning and understanding aesthetic communication, and as a methodology for changing mindset.*
5. *A holistic approach, seeing sustainability in the context of landscape and regional-building traditions, rather than isolated, technological knowledge.*

Based on input from the interviews with students, teachers and alumni, some dilemmas emerge related to these basic identity-factors.

Architecture and professionalism within the field is always tied to skills, knowledge and understanding based on conscious or unconscious value perspectives. Therefore, in developing the school, it seems important to communicate the basic values and perspectives, not only to the external world, but also to the internal community of teachers, staff and students. These identity-factors may be dynamic and changing with time, but currently it is somewhat unclear if it is up to each individual teacher to decide how to relate to this. Thus, there is a risk that the shared perception of what BAS is, and should be, is gradually fragmented. This is not only a question of the individual teacher's knowledge of BAS but it raises the difficult question of loyalty to the basic identity factors. The, sometimes different, perspectives of new brushes and old brushes (teachers) points towards the same dilemma of being either too flexible or too rigid in relation to these fundamental aspects of the school.

## DISCUSSION

*COMMENT: I think this boils down to two possible points of view. Either there is an advantage in having a fixed foundation of beliefs from which the school and its people may constantly draw and which gets reinterpreted through time. Or the idea of a common culture (including history) defining the school is advanced, but this is freely evolving from the meetings, dialogues and conflicts that constantly occur.*

*COMMENT: Should BAS cling to a formula or a manifest, even if such a core of education embodies change itself? Would it be better to base their activities on the people and discussions that are present and let that deviate, in order to build the most sustainable school of architecture?*

*COMMENT: The most important thing is to make sure that BAS, with old and new teachers and students, finds interesting ways to discuss and develop the origins, in line with societal and environmental changes.*

*COMMENT: Presently, are these still considered the five main identity factors of BAS? If so, are people at BAS generally aware of them? And if not, do we agree with the importance of these factors? In other words, are these factors a 'given' at BAS or have we, as the Evaluation Committee, sifted them out?*

*COMMENT: The five identity-factors point out a direction. This direction constantly needs to be adjusted, cultivated and developed. Without them the school will slowly merge with mainstream architectural ideology.*

*COMMENT: It seems important to consider these 'identity factors' in respect of the context of other architecture schools in Norway? (see 'Alternative Profile' below). If the pedagogical context changes, do these factors need to change accordingly?*

## QUESTIONS:

- **Are the basic identity-factors still valid?**
- **If so, how are they communicated to new teachers and students?**
- **How to develop a shared and vital BAS culture, critical and committed at the same time?**

# 1. The Alternative Profile

*'Grunnutdanninga gjeld ikkje den teknisk profesjonelle arkitekten - men det ansvarleg samfunnsmevitne individet. All øving og trening gjeld utvikling av individet - til å uttrykkja seg, til å beherska språket. Opplegget, i leik og praksis, gjeld oppøving av sansane og å finna fram sitt evnegrunnlag.'* (BAS-alternativet, 1999)<sup>4</sup>

The evaluation group's conversation with the alumni group of earlier students at BAS from between 2006 - 2016 raised a number of key issues in respect of BAS' alternative profile and how it is transmitted into society and the labour market. Knowledge about visual structure, analytical learning and sensibility towards landscape is described as still being at the core of what these representatives see as their strengths as BAS- educated architects. Certain 'magical' transitions within their experience as students were mentioned by the alumni, with many important common points of reference (shared personal transitions): certain DAV exercises, the 4 weeks on the island, the Arne task, et al. Some of these moments and processes can be interpreted as 'rites of passage', established rituals at BAS that are vital to the students on a personal and professional level. The main criticism raised by the students concerned the question of the context of their learned body of knowledge in architecture history/theory at the time they were students.

*'In a changing world with both known and unknown challenges BAS gives their students the strength of always asking questions. This polemic approach is, together with the ability to read and enhance the given situation, [to be] a tool for change.'* (student alumni, 2021)

## DISCUSSION

*COMMENT: Is there too much freedom and openness in the tasks for students given to students during the first three years, when basic fundamental knowledge and skills need to be learned? (Example from Year 3 learning urban plan development: students are asked to choose a plot from a self-made urban plan and then to program and develop a complex building in the context of this plot. Is this a lot to handle at this level?).*

*COMMENT: The alternative profile vs basic tools of architectural practice, including technology and digital tools. How is this discussed at the moment?*

*COMMENT: 'I got an art education with emphasis on architecture. Maybe it should rather be an architecture education with emphasis on art.'* (student alumni, 2021)

*An alternative to conventional architectural practice has the potential to push boundaries and to challenge some set rules of architectural practice. However, this often seems to demand an even higher degree of scientific/artistic level and/or precision.*

*COMMENT: I think it is a fantastic ambition for a school to be alternative! The question is how to formulate that in a way which is useful for the school. It is perhaps difficult to simply state one wants to be different (and having, as a consequence, to change perpetually). Another option is to refer to the foundational “identity-factors” which somehow imply and embody the alternative. That could work if they are constantly reinterpreted (as in the discussion in the previous chapter), but it could also lead to reverence and stagnation. Yet another way is to state an ambition to act freely in relation to conventional curricula (most schools work quite similarly, and more so with the Bologna process, the EU architects directive and discussions within the EAEE) in order to have an education that would be more adapted to a certain profile of say material immediacy, local conditions or sustainability. So what would justify such a view in the context of the range of knowledge and competences an architect must have?*

*COMMENT: The above idea of a more narrowly defined ‘alternative profile’ is an interesting proposition. In the current moment could a greater focus and clarification of BAS’ profile strengthen it considerably?*

*COMMENT: On the one hand, one may observe that, given the huge span of questions and contexts an architect must today engage with, it is no longer possible to encompass knowledge of them all during five years of architectural education. There is simply not enough time to include everything. Often, demand comes up to include this or that in the education, but it will be at the expense of another element in the education. So it is to be expected to miss out on things, but more important is to give a strong foundation for having a certain profile, as discussed above.*

*On the other hand, what is most commonly asked for are the basic skills of an architect (how to draw, aesthetics/design, statics, building laws, the process etc). The simple answer here is that, however alternative a school may be, it is still easy and necessary to accommodate these demands.*

*Then again, this may be approached in different ways or, rather, with different attitudes. It necessarily must be brought into the curriculum as components of courses. Practically, however, this is often best made as a continuous dialogue between teacher and student. This requires a culture, teachers with practical knowledge as well as sufficient time for more open-ended engagements in the classroom. This all relates to questions we will bring up later in this report.*

*COMMENT: It is important to reflect on why increasing complexity is so often referred to – is this really true? How does this compare to other fields? Is it different within the field of architecture or do we all stay in the same ‘trouble’ And furthermore how to navigate and to stay ‘with the trouble’ (Donna Haraway)?*

*COMMENT: The question whether too much freedom in the first part of the education process happens at the expense of developing more conventional knowledge and skills (“professionalism”) addresses the pedagogic profile and basic identity of BAS. What the students experience very early in their education will have a great impact for their way of learning. I think this is a part of the necessary movement between structure and anti-structure that probably should be a part of all courses.*

*COMMENT: The strength and importance of BAS is not that it is just an alternative architectural education, but an alternative education with a specific history, values and profile. To develop this in a dynamic and bold way into the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s complex realities is the big challenge.*

*COMMENT: The 'alternative profile' seems to be lie especially with a mode of learning and learning a form of perceptiveness: 'I work with [other] BAS alumni, I feel they have antennas due to [being] trained in exposing themselves: we are... like a sponge. The training gives you a non-verbal ability: we are a kind of a tool. [This] complements architects from other schools well. We have learned sensitivity but also resistance.'* (student alumni, 2021)

## QUESTIONS:

- **Could a greater focus and clarification of BAS' alternative profile be useful for the school?**
- **How is the relationship between structure and experimentation in courses and overall learning treated currently?**
- **How can discussions around increasing complexity within the field of architecture position the school in respect of the alternative profile?**

## 2. Open Form

*The formative architectural approach at BAS is based on the Open Form concept formulated by Oskar Hansen at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts and further developed in Norway by his student, the Founding Rector, Svein Hatløy. Hansen taught at BAS from its foundation in 1986 until 1991, while Hatløy remained in post until 2007. The school's Open Form approach encourages inclusive processes and ambiguous designs while creating spatial and temporal situations that enable diverse kinds of collaboration and development. The original curriculum was built around the idea of subjectivity, making individuals take responsibility and providing space for inclusiveness, collaborative processes and facilitating users to be contributing members of society. Open Form has been a premise in teaching through the*

*exploration of the possibility of enabling democratic and participatory architectural principles and building open-ended ambiguous structures. (BAS website)<sup>5</sup>*

Open Form, as a point of view, a way of looking at the world (how it works and what it needs and, consequently, a point of view for operating within that world by building or adding to it) has been and still is a BAS particularity. Open Form integrates humanistic and democratic values into a methodology of organization of form, aesthetic communication, and expression.

In discussion with teachers, alumni and students Open Form was almost unanimously expressed as fundamental to BAS. Yet when we probed the question of Open Form more closely, it was not always a clear or a comprehensive understanding that materialised.

There seem to be a wide range of responses and understandings of Open Form, both among teachers and students. Some found it mystifying or “foggy”, some found it to be almost like a dogma, while others found it inspiring. Despite differing positions of understanding or perception, Open Form is clearly crucial to the BAS experience. Since the way of understanding and practising Open Form to a high degree has been based on Hatløy’s teaching, there is a challenge to develop this concept into a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. It seems crucial to do this in a way that contextualizes the concept and understands its historical background and to consider how Open Form is relevant for new generations of architects.

## DISCUSSION

*COMMENT: Coming from outside we experienced a strong focus, yet diffuse definitions of Open Form. When discussing Open Form, typically many things are discussed at the same time, often without addressing the different aspects or layers. Is Open Form a tool? An approach? A practice? A theory? A methodology? An ideology? A way of seeing? A moment of architectural history? A differentiation could help to acknowledge all these different aspects. A definition, on the other hand, may work against its potential.*

*COMMENT: Being charged with history, individual interpretations and unclarity, it is pertinent to ask what the role of Open Form is at the school now and what that role could be in the future?*

*COMMENT: An important point that a number of the alumni raised regarding the teaching of Open Form at BAS (whether explicit or implicit) is that it is not contextualized historically in relation to other architectural histories and theories. In this case, the ‘fogginess’ of the approach to Open Form is in danger of making it into a form of dogma - insofar as the students don’t experience it as a choice amongst alternatives.*

*COMMENT: BAS would do alright without such anchoring as the concept of Open Form – so it would be useful to have a discussion if it is still valid or if it should be passed into the archive of ideas? Still, it may also be very useful to have it as an origin or a backdrop to current activities. But then one must make sure it does not become dogmatic or exegetic. Rather it must be kept active, playful and reinterpretable (and misinterpretable). And surely a thing as Open Form would be able to do that!*

*Personally, however, I would be quite annoyed with an environment that has some form of ideological origin like that. In a sound environment (as a school of architecture is) this would provoke opposition which, in itself, may be very good but then it again departs from the origin. So a rather light, careful introduction and deployment of Open Form may be advisable.*

*COMMENT: From my point of view there seems to be an excellent potential within the context of Open Form to address today's well known environmental and societal challenges; injustice, migration, climate crisis and so forth.*

*COMMENT: Insofar as many students find the methodology of Open Form to be "foggy" and difficult to grasp, it seems to be a typical 'Threshold Concept'. Threshold Concepts concerns specific parts in a learning trajectory that require a new way of thinking to be able to take the leap to the next level of knowledge or general understanding within a discipline (Meyer/Land). A pedagogy that acknowledges this and supports a step-by-step progressive development of the understanding of Open Form could be a healthy challenge for the teaching staff as part of the transformative learning profile of BAS.*

*COMMENTS: students don't really grasp what Open Form is and they definitely need more steering in this direction.*

*COMMENT: You could see the undefined character of Open Form as a problem, or you could see it as a potential*

## **QUESTIONS:**

To achieve a status where Open Form at BAS is a premise for education in architecture and engagement with landscape, built form and society, we suggest following questions:

- **What would BAS be without Open Form?**
- **How can Open Form be discussed and developed as pedagogical practice? What are the characteristics and what are the challenges?**
- **How to best utilise the potential relation between Open Form and being an alternative school?**
- **How to contextualize Open Form and develop it as a potent methodology of the 21st century?**

## 3. DAV

The clear place that the DAV has had since the beginning of BAS as an architectural school gives it a firm grounding in the school's ethos. This is reflected very clearly both in current and former student's accounts of their experience at BAS where the DAV teaching is recognised positively as contributing in important ways to their education. The close integration of artistic and architectural practice in Oscar Hansen's studio provides the clear precursor. The focus on developing student's capacities for taking notice, on open-ended formal and spatial experimentation and on the idea a 'the scrap heap' to be mined for its potentialities is valuable. Early manifestations of the Open Form ethos were already quite focused on process over object, non-hierarchical relations and the potentials of experimentation in respect of developing communicative and cognitive processes. DAV at BAS seems closely aligned still to this approach.

*"learning to take notice, learning to see, ... showing and making present qualities that are already there, hidden in an existing situation." (Martin Braathen)<sup>6</sup>*

The aim to begin at the level of basic development of observation and sensorial capacities in relation to immediate surroundings and experience gives all students an important grounding. In the Foundation years drawing is developed both as a skill and means of communication and as a process that develops close observation and awareness. It would seem that the structure of DAV in the first three years of the course especially has a strong lineage from the early days of the BAS and its grounding in Open Form. Typically approaches within the realm of DAV include performance, charcoal drawings, the Warsaw Game, 1:1 exercises, sketching, and building workshops. At the Master's level DAV seems to be approached as a source for conceptual and imaginative understandings and methods of approach to space, architecture and ecology. I.e., DAV clears a space for experimentation. It is also important to note that, aside from visual art, students are encouraged to consider other fields like literature, cinema, theatre, sport, etc.

In Hatloy's system learning to see is first; making things visible for others follows. This could be helpful as a framework for thinking about uses and values of DAV for architecture even at the more conceptual level.

## DISCUSSION

*COMMENT: Is there some ambivalence regarding the place of DAV within BAS as an architecture school.? It is to be expected that DAV teaching will input in different ways at the different levels. However, would a broader overview regarding progressions be helpful? Is there enough communication between all levels of the course in respect of the role of DAV? Is there a consensus on what is vital for the students to learn/experience from DAV?*

*COMMENT: Year 3 projects have been described as somewhat 'dry': the requirements of 'professionalism' might at this level outweigh other concerns. Teachers have raised the concern that DAV is at times treated as an 'extra'.*

*COMMENT: When/if DAV becomes 'extra', i.e., not integrated in the student's investigations towards an architectural project; my experience from 3rd year assessment is that the discussion after a presentation often becomes a more or less straightforward architectural discussion about the project and theme. This was, in some cases, difficult for the artist assessor to enter. That is a lost opportunity. In prioritizing project over process, one seems to at the same time choose the direction of discussion afterwards: more building-related, and a step towards more professionalization?*

*COMMENT: On the other hand, what students absorb from the DAV teaching does not always have to be explicit in their projects at all points. Some of that knowledge and experience can operate on a less conscious level and may need to percolate over time.*

*COMMENT: In Years 1-3 aspects of Open Form are still central in at least some of the DAV teaching (Visual Structures, the Great Number, etc), and this would seem to require that the teachers have some knowledge of Open Form principles. The integration of art and architecture in Open Form in its early moment (Hanson) will likely have had a strong grounding and logic in the relationship between architecture and forms of visual art practice specific to that period (in particular, explorations in abstract and structural spatial relations, kinetics). These priorities are very different from the majority of contemporary art practices today. This poses a tension in respect of the role of DAV at BAS, especially, insofar as contemporary art practice is a very fluid field - including dance, music, film, socially engaged practices, et al - all of which can be relevant to architecture. Could this be capitalised upon more?*

*COMMENT: It is great to point out that DAV is unique (this approach truly makes BAS unique) and also to point out the relation to Open Form. DAV comes in many forms and has many uses. It is in itself an open concept that can be interpreted and developed in further ways, i.e., the opposite of a closed concept whose interpretation and application is already determined.*

*COMMENT: Again, as with Open Form, it is to me a bit foggy what the expression "the other world" means for Hansen/Hatløy and thus for BAS. I take it to mean another world that may be created or opened up with the help of various artistic practices. This must further mean that such a world stands in some form of relation to the present world (the everyday world, or the world of a project the student is developing). So apart from other uses of DAV (such as composition, discovery of material, the body, etc.), there must be ways to make inferences from one world in order to develop the other. Here we must introduce the concept of representation and with that a load of theory which, in the hands of (a practical) teacher, may develop the way DAV is applied within a project. Awareness of the concept of representation is essential to develop DAV as a model.*

*COMMENT: Many students find a certain freedom in the DAV-training that at its best raises the quality of architectural projects. DAV is a way to exceed the conventional, known or foreseen.*

*COMMENT: As with Open Form, I think the "fogginess" of DAV is both a potential and a challenge, like a continuous movement between structure and anti-structure. For me DAV potentially opens up a very wide horizon which boundaries are beyond concepts and cognitive structured knowledge.*

*COMMENT: It is interesting that one might claim that three of BAS' main identity factors – DAV, Open Form and the 'Alternative Profile' represents a triple helix fogginess. I wonder if that is the ultimate strength of the school: the main question is how to encircle and manage the clarity-uncertainty interplay.*

## **QUESTIONS:**

- **What is vital for the students to learn/experience from DAV?**
- **Are forms of 'induction' necessary for DAV teachers? I.e., what level of understanding do the DAV teachers need to have of the discipline of architecture to be able to contribute as productively as possible to the curriculum?**
- **What degree of autonomy should DAV teaching have and how much should it be integrated into architectural teaching?**
- **Do DAV teachers need a grounding in Open Form principles if Open Form remains central to BAS?**

## 4. Sustainability and the Regional Perspective

From its origin, BAS has emphasized an integrated knowledge of climate, landscape and local, traditional (vernacular) architecture to equip students with environmental awareness. There is a link between the regional perspective and sustainability that, in the future, could be even more articulated. BAS is taking advantage of the geographical location on the west coast of Norway to learn from, discuss and explore sustainability in many different forms, as explained below:

**Landscapes, regional building traditions, innovation and materials:** *The teaching at BAS draws on Western Norwegian vernacular building culture that has developed within the context of a particular climate and landscape. During their studies, students experience and have to engage with the different landscape spaces and patterns of settlement inland and along the coast, through a mixture of analysis and practical work such as repairing wear and tear at old boathouses and sheds. Interdisciplinary collaboration with fields such as meteorology, landscape ecology and construction history are important elements of the core education. The school's teaching emphasises the importance of using field work and societal or situational analysis to set the parameters for design work. By experiencing place-specific, traditional and innovative uses of materials, we seek to enable students to challenge standard practice in the construction industry today and to develop considerate and sustainable design approaches for tomorrow.*

**Sustainability:** *The concept of 'Holdbar' (or 'sustainable') was introduced as a complementary approach for all teaching in the 2009 Strategic Plan to allow issues relating to sustainability to become an intrinsic part of all student projects, academic discussions, research, and development. By tackling sustainability issues, the school shall challenge perspectives in the discourse to climate change and resource management, exploring what it means to be responsible and professional, in situations where diversity and living conditions are at stake, both in local and universal contexts. For BAS it is important to relate sustainability to historical contexts, the natural environment, resources, energy, and climate, while also promoting and supporting a notion that is more strongly rooted in the needs of society. Within this framework, the school aims to widen the attention of innovation relating to reuse, user participation, and regional vernacular building and landscape management to challenge the current focus on green growth. (BAS website)<sup>7</sup>*

Schools of architecture, including BAS are discussing how to act on the climate crisis. However, differently from the two other schools of architecture in Norway, landscape is formative to the curriculum at BAS. We see how students in various tasks and projects reflect upon landscape questions. Also, the fact that the school opened for educating landscape architects for a period of time underscores the emphasis in landscape. The landscapes of the west-coast of Norway – linked to the larger North Sea - European landscapes through the Lyngheikultur – is a formative learning ground. BAS was founded to explicitly relate to the conditions presented by the local context and landscape. This is valid also today and is manifest through different courses and exercises. There is a natural understanding of the need and placement of architecture, including climate, material and the social situation. We can see that this is reflected back into the school and its pedagogy.

On the very first day at BAS, the first-year students leave for the “enigmatic island trip”. Being confronted with the urgent need to establish shelter in a windy and wet landscape gives the students what seems to be an effective and direct response to the question ‘why architecture?’: in the sense of why humans and companion species build shelters in various forms and functions. The students’ experiences from these four initial weeks, which includes studying and restoring vernacular buildings, seems to activate interest and understanding of the interplay between nature and culture. This is often followed through in later students’ projects, even in diploma works. The Year 1 trip to the island makes students experience and understand architecture in terms of an immediate relation between their physical being and actuality of natural forces.

The regional perspective and the landscape focus create a foundation for sustainable thinking and doing amongst the students. We see this as a significant and strong part of the BAS-curriculum. However, we also see in some of the weaker works from third, fourth and fifth years a struggle to bridge the gap between the rural, cultural landscapes of the west coast, including the vernacular architecture; “grindbygget”, “lemstova” and “klyngetunet” and contemporary, urban landscapes. A more systematic and knowledge-based analysis of why this is happening would be beneficial and it could potentially be about more than tackling the urban-rural divide or better translating what is learnt from tradition. By bringing in an even deeper and more systematic knowledge of landscape to the education of architects at BAS, new and crucial approaches to sustainability could be developed.

## DISCUSSION

*COMMENT: Student works shown at BAS the last year that are more landscape based - nature as "complex building", is an interesting signal. At best, they bring forward the discussion "when not to build" - but rather facilitate nature in an urban context, which I found very refreshing.*

*COMMENT: The physical, bodily and sense-based approach to landscape and site seem to be even more important today, when digital representation (both two- and three-dimensional) more and more replaces the architect’s direct relation to place. BAS could well be at the forefront here in merging the humanistic, artistic and sense-based knowledge with innovative use of digital tools.*

*COMMENT: In the Diploma Projects that I have examined some of the best have been able to take the link between the vernacular and its relation to local landscape, culture and climatic conditions to a diverse range of contexts, including Africa and India. There have been concerns expressed that the TTA aspect of the course is somewhat neglected (see below). Could it (or is it already?) tied more closely to these studies of the vernacular?*

## QUESTIONS:

- **How can BAS take even more advantage of the close connection and approaches to history and landscape in educating architects for the 21st century?**
- **What could be the explicit principles of sustainability infused in the curriculum?**

## 5. Learning

The four sections of BAS educational structure, APP (architecture, planning and projects), TTA (technology, economy and administration), DAV (The Other World) and KTF (complementary academic subjects) are meant to establish an integral framework where fundamental aspects of the discipline are covered.

The pedagogical profile is centred towards the students' formation and in developing competence within the field based on personal participation, visual communication and understanding of social and cultural context. The low-tech approach of BAS is regularly referred to as a strength which makes students creative and flexible in their approaches. In the hands-on approach of the students there is an emphasis on learning through making and acting as well as a strong focus on the body as an initial point of reference before moving outward to the macro scale. The first semester trip to Utsira allows the students to experience and understand architecture in terms of an immediate relation between their physical being and the actuality of natural forces. The school shows a strong emphasis on spatial experimentation through objects, physical forms, model-making as well as 1:1 exploration through both building and body/action experiments.

The BAS-building itself is a key pedagogic tool. The raw, industrial building and its spaces gives a distinct character to BAS as a site but it is also strongly related to pedagogy and the scholarly attitude to the building. The spaces are rough and allowing. The freedom the students have to work with the building whether in larger scale design (the library, the kitchen) or smaller interventions means that there is experience with physical actualisation of ideas. I.e., students 'live' with the changes that they introduce. This is an important pedagogic experience which should be protected and maintained. Students learn to take initiative by being allowed (or

required) to physically modify the surrounding spaces making it a constant test situation. This has repercussions on the projects and on the social situation within the school as well.

The correlation between some structural aspects of the curriculum, the school's ambition and the learning outcome need to be discussed. The TTA-part of the projects seem to have low priority and seldom well developed or understood by the students. Regarding skills in making architectural drawings (plans, sections, elevations), these seem to be developed slowly, late, and short, making too many students uncertain of their skills in using basic architectural communications tools. This lack of confidence is typically amplified when using digital drawing tools. These challenges are related to the discussion of BAS as an alternative architectural education. When discussing "professionalization", the question is what kind of professional profile BAS wants to represent?

Another challenge is how to bring all the teachers into a shared discussion of the pedagogical profile. It is one thing to have diverse perspectives and preferences on pedagogical methods, but it is another thing not to know about the profile, ethics and the methods characterizing the school. This is of special concern because so many teachers come from different traditions and pedagogical backgrounds. The pedagogical salon seems to be a very important new initiative regarding this issue.

A learning environment that focuses on independence and the freedom to explore individual ways of working is for some students a liberation and for others very challenging. Some skills are learned through guidance and repetition and some through open and creative explorations. The transformative learning perspective of the latter seems to have a priority in most courses, while the more instrumental perspectives in learning certain skills (the use of digital tools, projection drawing etc.) seems to have less priority. The uncertainty, anti-structure and "fogginess" of transformative processes can for some students, if constantly exposed to it, be extremely challenging. Thus, the balance between transformative and instrumental learning processes should be discussed, so that students with different prerequisites can blossom.

## DISCUSSION

*COMMENT: Nice that the question of the "alternative" comes back here. If you want to be alternative, what are the implications, good or bad, in what the students learn or how they perform in a working environment? But, just to add, we should here not be restricted to a trivial understanding of what an architect will do professionally now or in the future. Perhaps BAS educates architects for future needs. That's also a part of being alternative.*

*COMMENT: An important point. Professionalism can imply adapting to existing requirements and conventions of the discipline. Should the BAS 'alternative' approach provide students with tools for a genuinely flexible approach to new kinds of problems?*

*COMMENT: It should be OK to not learn extensive computer skills, even though we can point out the disadvantages for getting a job at a regular architects' office. But it must be required to have a thorough understanding of architectural representational and projective formats.*

*COMMENT: The discussion of analogue vs digital tools is for me most interesting when talking about precision. Communication and practising architectural language is key in BAS-alternativet (1999). In order to communicate architectural ideas, one must be precise, and this should be practised in all possible ways.*

*COMMENT: This discussion is also a gender issue that should be taken very seriously. In the BAS analogue environment, it is easy to avoid proper training in contemporary digital tools. Maybe the school should define a minimum to ensure that all students, regardless of gender or personal interest have a certain level before graduating.*

*COMMENT: The students perceive the creative and experimental approach of BAS as a strong quality.*

*COMMENT: Resilience is one of the most important things that the school can help to provide a foundation for students. They need to develop their own motivation and learn to handle insecurities.*

## **QUESTIONS:**

- **What does “professionalism” mean in the BAS-context (and its status as ‘alternative’)? What profile of architectural competence is BASic?**
- **How could the potential for using structural elements as basic aspects of architectural expression be better developed at BAS? What could be the bridge between visual structure and building structures?**
- **How is the school’s approaches to learning communicated and discussed with teachers, censors and students?**
- **How to balance instrumental and transformative learning processes, structure and anti-structure?**

## 6. The Community

A fundamental factor is all the people and groups attached to the school. They have different relationships to the school, but we still want to emphasize that it is one community in order to stress the overall togetherness and sense of belonging to the school. The members of the community have different interactions with the school and, over time, may transfer from one group and relation to another. There is an overall communication within the community, and it makes the school what it is.

As the groups that make up the community are momentarily quite distinct and have particular roles, it is relevant to describe each group, its specificities and how the group may progress in its role:

- 1) The students are the most important group. The school is for the students. This group generally knows the least of what is expected from an architectural education and a further career. They are also in transition throughout their time in school. Students may form strong opinions on how the school should work and, as we have seen historically, they may sometimes lead radical change in the way we look at architecture.
- 2) Many teachers are only in part-time employment at the school and have an architectural or artistic practice as a parallel occupation. As much as this is valuable, it also constrains the time at the school. The risk is that the general communication diminishes (non-curricular communication both between teachers and with students), and that the teaching therefore becomes too focused on specific tasks within the courses. Furthermore, many teachers live in other places, which may exacerbate this condition.
- 3) The administration consists of a small number of people. However, it is often they who have the longest experience within the school and stand for the continuity of tradition, knowledge and communication. These are the individuals who students tend to go to for counselling and they, thus, often have a strong understanding of personal matters.
- 4) Former BAS students – the alumni – make up the largest group with experience of the school. They become ambassadors for the school and witnesses of the school at the time they were there. They carry the understanding and reputation of BAS into workplaces and to other countries.
- 5) The neighbours. The school is also set in a neighbourhood and contact with persons living or working in the area can help in many different ways. Exchange with the local community could probably develop further.

## DISCUSSION

*COMMENT: The students are recruited through motivation and performance their interviews. Each class is curated to achieve diversity. Experience, age, background and gender are all factors taken into consideration. This was emphasized as an important and positive factor in all the different group interviews.*

*COMMENT: This goes for the students the school admits in the first year, and perhaps also for the students admitted to the master programme in the fourth year. For the exchange students, the sending schools make the selection.*

*COMMENT: This means in effect that both students and teachers have diverse backgrounds. This is generally seen as an asset, and one must consider what it means for the culture that is created at BAS. It seems that it would indicate a culture with a broad knowledge that is quick to adapt to new circumstances. However, this strategy could also result in more shallow knowledge of local conditions.*

*COMMENT: To which degree does a “BAS spirit” or culture change or diminish in the diploma level when many new students come?*

*COMMENT: How are the teacher’s values concerning working culture affecting the students’ physical and psychological health? In other words, do teachers drive the students too hard, and expect long working hours or better results? This is an ongoing discussion in many architecture schools and should require some form of statement or guidelines.*

*COMMENT: Probably this needs to be complemented with consideration of the character of the working situation for students at BAS. Is it enjoyable? Does it emphasize a collective endeavour? How are goals set and discussed?*

*COMMENT: The common situation is that a teacher is only part-time at the school, having other work parallel to it. Furthermore, many teachers come from abroad and have their residence in another country. Bergen is, in architectural terms, a small place, and, to maintain its quality, the school has attracted a large percentage of international teachers. This has several consequences that should be discussed: firstly, the faculty don’t meet sufficiently such that a natural ongoing dialogue and a common culture may be achieved; and, secondly, the informal contact with the students diminishes with contact concentrated more on specific occasions such as seminars and critiques.*

*COMMENT: What would be the advantages and consequences of having more full-time faculty residing in Bergen? Perhaps the international outlook would suffer but it could accomplish a more specific and locally determined school. To form a culture, it is necessary to be there.*

*COMMENT: There is the ‘50% dilemma’ in which it is difficult for many teachers to have both substantial teaching commitments and their own practice. Typically, this involves difficulties in economically sustaining their practice, resulting in teachers*

*badly funded in time and money. BAS should consider alternative models, such as lower percentages (20% employment), and more full-time faculty.*

*COMMENT: It may be that the '50%' vs 100% dilemma is considered too rigidly. For example, a teacher with a 50% contract could be 100% for just one term. There are also other percentage options. Maybe we should ask what a 100% position could be? Could it be for one year, two years, three years etc. Could it be for teachers who have a special responsibility for continuity in the first three years etc?*

*COMMENT: It is important to only have 50% positions. People will be less awake and too comfortable if they have 100% positions.*

*COMMENT: I think there are many challenges with only 50% positions. Those who are from Bergen seem to get much more administrative tasks than those from abroad. Still, they are supposed to do the same amount of teaching – in practice they do even more.*

*COMMENT: To do research within the timeframe of a 50% position is not realistic. Usually, the 50% is even hard to limit within the teaching obligations.*

*COMMENT: There should be two teacher-seminars each year, one each semester. One of them could every year be at Utsira, like earlier practiced*

## **QUESTIONS:**

- **How to ensure that the Community becomes an asset and a power of the school?**
- **How should BAS ensure that the working environment is stimulating and exciting but not psychologically overwhelming?**
- **How can the school balance the advantage of both an international faculty (as well as students) and the basis in local conditions?**
- **Is there a way to differentiate the employment conditions to accommodate for the different situations of the teachers, thus having a more complementary set of teachers?**
- **What would be the best forum for students, teachers and staff to meet and discuss important issues of the school**

## 7. Research

Research at BAS is embedded in the teaching. However, there is a need to develop a strategy and an action plan to develop it sufficiently. Research is a particular topic that we believe there is a need for the institution to look more into. The problem of a lack of documentation of BAS' historical achievements since its beginnings (the tendency for this to 'disappear' from one course to the next) has been commented on by numerous teachers. Addressing this through a more formalised research culture is one way forward.

Over the last ten years there has been an increasing awareness at BAS of the importance of research manifested in:

1. collaborating with UiB and other academic institutions.
2. more consciousness of the value of hiring staff with a focus on research or a PhD
3. including research in teaching

*“The important question is not whether the school should do research or not, but what research at BAS should be and how it can be developed. It could, for example, be practice-based research, developed as a speciality at BAS.”* (teacher BAS, 2021)

### DISCUSSION

*COMMENT: The lack of a substantial body of research/research culture at BAS will become, if it is not already, a problem. To continue to build on the BAS basic identity factors there is a need to develop 'BAS knowledge' also at the level of research. How can research not only be addressed, but become a natural part of the school?*

*COMMENT: Research at BAS could, for example, be practice-based research, developed as a speciality at BAS. As a start, the school should consider carefully which field(s) of research to engage in first, so that the choices do not become arbitrary or ad hoc but in line with the knowledge profile of the school.*

*COMMENT: Practice is often not understood as research. It can and should be. But research needs to be understood as both investigation and reflection.*

*COMMENT: BAS should become a 'Research School'. It has operated for 35 years without a comprehensive documentation of its work.*

*COMMENT: Is there a danger of academicism? BAS is about alternative architectural practice, not academic research.*

*COMMENT: Research should not only be understood as PhD research.*

*COMMENT: Maybe research at BAS could be founded through other institutions or in collaboration with other institutions?*

*COMMENT: Perhaps what will happen by introducing aspects of research in the school is that the faculty will come out as a voice, in other words, that BAS will be much more articulate in expressing itself within society.*

## **QUESTIONS:**

- **Could more stable relations and formal collaborations to other institutions be established in regards to research?**
- **How can BAS support and encourage staff to apply for PhD-stipends?**
- **What should research at BAS be (artistic, practice-based and/or scientific)? And how can it be manifested in a future BAS context?**
- **How can research and teaching be better connected and what are the economic and disciplinary implications of this?**

# CONCLUSION

The achievements of BAS through its history and progress to the present moment as an independent, 'alternative' school of architecture are unique, as is its pedagogic approach. As the Evaluation Committee we have no doubts about BAS' strength and singularity. We also are convinced that there are characteristics and values in its past and present life that need to be nurtured and defended into the future. But as with any organism, its continuing vitality also requires strategic considerations for successful renewal.

Rather than a definitive evaluation of BAS as an architectural school, the intention of this report is to form part of an ongoing reflexive process for the teaching team at BAS. Our aim is not to tell BAS what it should do as an institution to make itself 'better'. It is, instead, to use our external perspective to make observations and to raise questions that could facilitate future decision-making toward a 'better BAS'. In other words, our ultimate goal is to be useful rather than prescriptive.

It is undoubtedly beneficial to commission an external review which can shine a light on critical issues, especially by way of comparison with other educational situations. However, we strongly believe that improvement must come from within the school and that the basis for success is an ongoing dialogue within the school. This does not mean that all forces for change or improvement are simply emergent and naturally arise from such a dialogue: a diligent leadership will likely be a decisive factor.

We are looking forward to seeing the development of the school. Over the past half year, we as the Evaluation Committee, have had close contact with BAS. In the process of making this report we have regarded many different perspectives: from comparisons with other schools of architecture internationally to observing in detail with the spatial facilities of the school. During the process we have also had numerous encounters with people with various relations to and functions within the school. We are happy to discover a school that has great strength in its power to discuss, to critically reflect and to progress. We are convinced that BAS will continue to emerge as a vital part of both the Norwegian and international architectural discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> BAS Periodic Programme Evaluation 2021: Task description

<sup>2</sup> Svein Hatløy, Espen Rahlff, Mona Steinsland, 1999, *BAS-alternativet: den norske private arkitektøgskulen*

<sup>3</sup> The Architecture Association in London served as a model for structuring BAS.

<sup>4</sup> *The basic education is not about the technical professional architect but the liable socially conscious individual. All exercises and training are about the development of each individual to express themselves and to master the language. The program, through play and practice, concerns the training of the senses and discovery of the basis of ability.* (Svein Hatløy, Espen Rahlff, Mona Steinsland, 1999, *BAS-alternativet : den norske private arkitektøgskulen*)

<sup>5</sup> BAS website 'About BAS: Foundation/Open Form'

<sup>6</sup> Martin Braathen, 2019, *The Magician and the Shoemaker: Debates in Open Form and Marxist Leninism in Norway around 1970*. NTNU

<sup>7</sup> BAS website 'About BAS: Foundation/Open Form'  
(<https://bas.org/en/grunnlag-og-strategi/>)