Sarah Whiting, William Ward Watkin Professor and Dean of the Rice University School of Architecture (RSA), is rethinking the nature of architectural practice from its foundation: architectural education. “Architecture touches everything, and as faculty our job is to open up students’ minds to how the world organizes space,” she says. “Nothing is more exciting.” As architects increasingly face changing and complex economic, environmental, and political atmospheres, Whiting puts forth an incisive discourse. It is a call to action that has shaped her academic and administrative work at RSA as well as her own architectural practice at WW Architecture.

“I think that schools should take on and influence the value of architecture and urbanism,” she says, citing her strong opinions and her own desire to help lead Rice in that regard as among the reasons she became Dean in 2010. “I felt that reveling in the fun side of academia and not making the tough decisions was not enough. Innovation is difficult.” In addition to her role as an administrator, Whiting continues to teach and write. She has published numerous articles and books, and is a protagonist for the architectural journal Log as well as editor of POINT, a book series of essays on architecture.

Perhaps Whiting has become best known for her criticism. The highly influential article “Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism,” coauthored with R.E.
Somol in 2002 for Prospects: The Yale Architectural Journal, Vol 33, detailed a shift to a projective practice, encouraging architects to go beyond criticism to action through their projects. Today, Whiting calls for the elimination of polarizing paradigms in architectural practice — destructive binaries such as “practice versus theory” or “object versus context.” Whiting’s proposed engaged autonomy embraces the interdisciplinary nature and physical contexts in which architecture is realized, while also demanding that both form and program are essential to architectural expression. In her keynote for the 2015 New Zealand Institute for Architects Conference, Whiting argued: “We are at a very critical time today, both for architectural schools and architectural practice. It is a moment when architecture risks losing its relevance and becoming purely a service industry.” She is interested in the multidimensional relationships of architecture, its collective public audience, and how practice can engage the public. Her perspective is fundamental to the RSA program and curriculum.

“We have a responsibility to push the field forward,” notes Whiting. Teaching students how to design, how to articulate arguments for architectural ideas, and how to communicate with a general audience is important to Whiting. Also fundamental to her pedagogy is introducing students to the leaders of the field through lecture series, talks, and juries. In order to provide students with real-world experience, the RSA Preceptorship Program, formed in 1968, places undergraduates in sought-after firms across the nation for one year. In 2014, RSA introduced a Master of Arts in Architecture with its Present Future Program currently directed by Professor Albert Pope. “This new program is tied to a faculty member’s research and creates a model of collective research,” says Whiting. “Present Future takes on urgent contemporary topics that require a collaborative effort to move them forward. Each cohort is more like a lab, doing a shared project.”

In small size: RSA has approximately 120 undergraduate students and 50 graduate students, helps foster the think tank-like atmosphere promoted on the school’s website. Its success is demonstrated in its consistent ranking as a top architecture school. For the faculty and students, Whiting provides a challenging and healthy environment. “Sarah is so supportive of students and faculty, creating a dynamic atmosphere where ideas can develop in thought and in deed. She sets a high standard for rigorous research, design, critique, and the act of making,” says Professor Nonya Grenader, FMA. Architectural historian and senior lecturer Stephen F. Fox notes: “Sarah Whiting is an amazing combination of rigor, discipline, energy, empathy, and imagination. She focuses simultaneously on the big pictures and telling details. She’s smart, tough, demanding, gentle, generous, and supportive. She’s an intellectual leader — and a caring person.”

Whiting feels lucky to do work that interests her both at the university and in her own practice at WW Architecture, which she co-founded with her partner Ron Witte. The firm was awarded a Texas Society of Architects 2015 Studio Award for its Kaihui Exchange project in Changsha, China. The duo just completed a single-family home in Houston. “It is rare to find clients who will support experimental architecture,” says Whiting. The Kaihui Exchange and the El House both work off of an internal organization, which Whiting says “creates an entire world.” The projects engage form, engendering flexibility and “catalyzing space.” Courtyards provide links to a series of views in both projects. When describing the El House, Whiting emphasizes the use of geometry to activate the plan: “Simple moves create spatial complexity in the house; we really enjoyed developing the plans.”

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