

COMMUNITY-LED DESIGN: LEARNING ON THE GROUND

Students in the University of Sydney's Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning look at the designed world differently thanks to the scholarship and research of people like Anna Rubbo, who has spent the last five years driving a project to improve the lives of the urban poor.

In 2009, Associate Professor Anna Rubbo won a major US architectural award for her leadership of international 'think and do tank' Global Studio – a collaboration between universities, local government and communities that aims to educate city-building professionals in ways that will better support people-centred community development.

More than half the world's inhabitants live in urban areas, a billion of them in slums. This figure is expected to rise to 3 billion by 2020 if nothing is done. Rubbo, however, is one of those taking action through Global Studio.

A response to criticism from the United Nations Millennium Project Task Force on Improving the Lives of Slum Dwellers (2002–04) that design professionals were poorly equipped to improve the lives of the urban poor, Global Studio was kick-started by two grants from the Sydney's International Program Development Fund in 2005 and 2006.

Rubbo (pictured left with students William Chan and Amalia Mayor) was a member of that taskforce, which among other things sought to identify new ways that education could support sustainable urbanisation.

With colleagues from Columbia University and the University of Rome, she developed the first Global Studio project in Istanbul in 2005. The international, interdisciplinary, and multi-institutional partnerships have been so effective that to date around 500 students and academics from 30 countries, 66 universities and 11 disciplines have participated in Global

Studio activities in Istanbul, Vancouver (2006) and Johannesburg (2007–09).

Those activities have also made a difference on the ground.

In 2009, Global Studio returned to Diepsloot – one of the poorest areas of Johannesburg – for the third consecutive year. In previous years Global Studio had helped insulate shacks and improve drains, and installed community chalkboards that people could use to communicate. In 2008, it helped initiate Diepsloot's first Arts and Cultural Festival – featuring everything from hip hop and beat boxing to educational theatre shows about AIDS – and encouraged the formation of a not-for-profit arts and culture network.

A key focus for 2009 was therefore to help the network consolidate. It had nowhere to meet, so Global Studio prepared design proposals for a centre to house the Diepsloot Arts and Culture Network, a community radio station and a 'shopfront' for local universities which could help meet Diepsloot's ongoing need for assistance. This included work by planner Sam White and social entrepreneurship student Paul O'Byrne to develop a community radio business plan with local entrepreneurs.

In relation to environmental deficits, Global Studio had seen the health and safety risks associated with a floodplain through the township, and responded to residents' need for a pedestrian bridge that would also serve as a market, meeting and performance space. Building on Mark Tyrrell's research for his urban design master's

thesis in 2008, designs were prepared in 2009.

Some of these proposals are on the City of Johannesburg website (www.joburg.org.za/content/view/4160/245), and Global Studio's Diepsloot work was selected for the 2009 4th International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam.

The University remains engaged with United Nations work, and in June hosted the executive director of UN-HABITAT, which has challenged universities worldwide to take a greater role in education and research that will support sustainable urbanisation.

Anna Tibaijuka appeared in the Sydney Ideas lecture series and also met with academics across the University to discuss how they could partner with UN-HABITAT in addressing sustainable urbanisation challenges.

In recognition of Global Studio, Rubbo received the Washington University 2009 Skandalaris award for leadership and entrepreneurship in architecture, design and the visual arts through community-based and sustainable practices.

One of her key objectives is to teach future professionals the importance of grass roots engagement and to show how thoughtful design can improve community wellbeing and health and provide employment opportunities.

Two architecture students who have felt the direct impact of this ethos, William Chan and Amalia Mayor, were selected to travel to Johannesburg to participate in a four-week Global Studio program during 2009.

“Sustainable urbanisation is a most pressing challenge, especially for the urban poor. The challenges are huge and there's an urgent need for academics and design and planning professionals to assist with this task.”

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
ANNA RUBBO
FACULTY OF
ARCHITECTURE, DESIGN
AND PLANNING



and we know a lot about what a school should be," says Chan. "Instead, we listened to the students who shared stories that we could use and integrate into our own designs and pinpoint exactly what they wanted."

Thanks to skills from the Sydney school project they were able to go directly into Diepsloot and talk to residents about their concerns in terms of issues such as housing and sanitation.

"Global Studio's achievements are often quite small and unconventional", continues Rubbo.

"'Design thinking' can be more useful than 'design outcomes' – thinking that can see possibilities, think laterally and creatively, and use social and technical interventions to make life more sustainable and equitable."

Rubbo is interested in how architecture and related disciplines can be used for the greater good, and her influence has been far-reaching. In recognition of her educational work, she was highly commended in the 2009 Vice-Chancellor's Award for Outstanding Teaching (see panel, right).

"For me it's been a turning point going to Global Studio", says Chan.

"I'm really convinced that this is right for me. Architecture isn't just about making money and winning awards. It's about using our influence to change humans and make our society better."

Mayor decided to study at Sydney because of what she'd heard about Global Studio's community-based work (for more examples see www.theglobalstudio.com), and she and Chan were first introduced to Rubbo's ideas through a design project to redevelop a Sydney school.

Chan underlines the importance of working with people, in this case school students, in their own environment.

"Anna stresses this a lot – we shouldn't go in there and say 'we're the architects

INTERNSHIPS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

A new University initiative combines work and study to enhance the student experience for students visiting Sydney on the Study Abroad program.

The Study Abroad Internship Program has placed more than 35 students from 10 different nationalities in work placements with leading business and government organisations.

"We have found that students who complete the Internship Program feel more included, have a wider network of friends and feel more engaged in

Australian life," says Fiona Tschaut, who coordinates the program from the University's International Office.

As part of the program, students must complete a series of professional development workshops which provide information on the Australian workplace, Australian business etiquette, communication skills and networking and mentoring.

"Our evaluations with workplaces have shown that there has been a two-way learning experience taking place," said Tschaut.

Left: Sydney student William Chan working on the 2009 Global Studio project in Diepsloot.

Right: Chiara van Vliet who spent her summer working as an industrial relations assistant at electricity network provider TransGrid through SydneyTalent, a University program to support workplace experience.

VICE-CHANCELLOR'S AWARDS 2009

Award for Outstanding Teaching:
Associate Professor Janette Bobis
Faculty of Education and Social Work

Dr Merran Govendir
Faculty of Veterinary Science

Dr Rosina Mladenovic
Faculty of Economics and Business

Dr Liam Semler
Faculty of Arts

Dr Ariadne Vromen
Faculty of Arts

Highly commended applicants:

Dr Peter Gibbens
Faculty of Engineering and
Information Technology

Associate Professor Anna Rubbo
Faculty of Architecture, Design
and Planning

Award for Excellence in Research Supervision:

Associate Professor Sandra West
Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery

Highly commended applicants:

Associate Professor Carole Cusack
Faculty of Arts

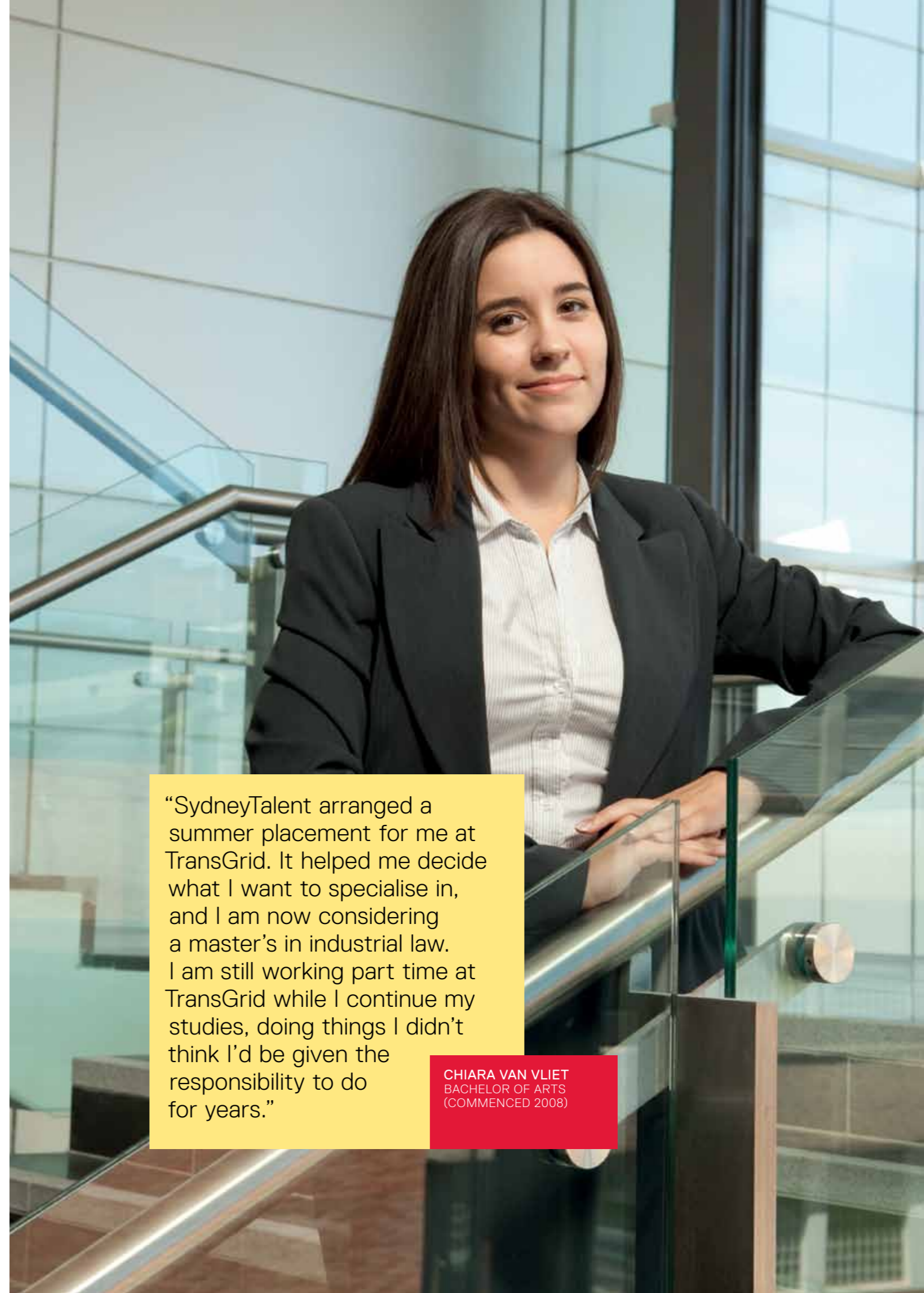
Associate Professor Cheryl Jones
Faculty of Medicine

Award for Systems that Achieve Collective Excellence in Teaching and Learning:

School of MMB Excellence in Learning and Teaching Evaluation (ELATE) Committee (Dr Helen Agus representative) – Faculty of Science

Faculty of Veterinary Science e-Learning Innovations Team (Dr Paul Sheehy representative) – Faculty of Veterinary Science

Study Unit Manager and Organiser (SUMO) Committee (Dr Fran Waugh representative) – Faculty of Education and Social Work



"SydneyTalent arranged a summer placement for me at TransGrid. It helped me decide what I want to specialise in, and I am now considering a master's in industrial law. I am still working part time at TransGrid while I continue my studies, doing things I didn't think I'd be given the responsibility to do for years."

CHIARA VAN VLIET
BACHELOR OF ARTS
(COMMENCED 2008)