

ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION AND ITS DOUBLE: THE NEW PROGRAMME 1968-1982 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

by Paul Boulard

In September, 1968, amidst a great deal of optimistic prose, a New Curriculum was instituted at the University of Toronto's Department of Architecture. It was proclaimed shortly thereafter that, with this Curriculum, the school was "at the front of a new architecture".

In the fall of 1982, a new Acting Dean was appointed to the Faculty of Architecture and Landscape Architecture. His mandate, from the University's governing body, quickly became clear. In an address to the Faculty Council in October, he asked the rhetorical question, "What is the use of retaining an undergraduate programme in Architecture that, after fourteen years, continues to alienate the rest of the University, the profession, and the Department's own best students?"

What had happened in those fourteen years? I believe that, in the re-evaluation of the New Programme now under way, the evidence coming to light suggests that implications of educational malpractice, and of the victimization of students, will have to be given serious and thoughtful consideration. Yet it now appears possible that such a state of affairs did not come about through the deterioration of what initially were good intentions. This paper seeks to provoke much-needed debate on the possibility that the New Programme embodied, from the very beginning, mechanisms that tended to militate against academic freedom in the learning of architecture. Moreover, it is not merely a story of parochial interest. The case of the New Programme at the University of Toronto raises issues that concern schools of architecture everywhere, whether they retain any legacy of the '60's or not.

By all accounts, Toronto's Department of Architecture prior to 1968 was a solid if not particularly high-profile school, with close ties to the profession. But university expansion was still under way, employment was high and traditional standards of educational quality were being thrown into question. 'Progressive education' was the banner of the times. The New Programme set out to dismantle the traditional structure of university architectural education — based on the lecture, the practical class and the design studio — and claimed to re-assemble the necessary content in the form of the "Core Problem". Within the Core Problem, a design project was to be understood as an "open-ended probe". There were no longer to be the usual mandatory lectures on matters of technology, history, theory, and design methods, nor practical classes in drawing and presentation methods. Instead, it was claimed that the student, as he progressed through one year-long design project, would at certain points in the project realize his need for certain kinds of information. At such times, it would be his responsibility to seek such information from the staff — who were no longer teachers, but had become, in the best Newspeak of the time, "resource persons". Each year of the five-year programme was divided into stages, some of which were designated as technical or historical "workshops", but always "relevant" to the theme of the year's project. Elective courses were still presented in a more traditional format, but the activities of the Core Problem

were the central concern, occupying in practice approximately ninety percent of the student's time.

There was a further important change. As "resource persons", the staff were to relinquish their former pedagogical authority in matters of design. Staff and students now formed a "peer group" in which everyone's opinion was of equal value, it was claimed, being based on his everyday experience of the world. Design projects were just as "open-ended" for professors as for students; there were "no right answers", and "the outcome was the truly unknown" or so claimed the school's Calendars at the time.

Here was a programme, then, that offered the appealing *cachet* of being in tune with the times; of meeting militant students' criticisms of outmoded educational structures and Establishment attitudes. The fact that it had been imported from a scene of real unrest and militancy — Columbia, 1967 — to one of backwoods calm was not often mentioned. The comparative novelty of pseudo-Leftists "social concern", of what was in reality second-hand Team X rhetoric, caught the imagination of students; for some, here was a respectable and inspiring cause.

Yet, even at the start, contradictions were conspicuous. If the design projects were truly "open-ended", why was there such a strongly moralistic tone in the criticism that students' work began to receive in those first few years? Why was it that the New Programme's legacy of Team X beliefs was never dealt with openly, in the context of more recent polemical positions and criticism of Team X's work? And why was it that, even though there were no "right answers", those students whose work parroted the iconography and rhetoric of Team X in general and Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger and Le Corbusier in particular (but without any sense of the sophisticated principles involved in the latter's work) became elevated to membership in an exclusive social group (the *Schutzstaffel*, as a disenchanted graduate once called it) around certain staff members? Indeed, if the New Programme sought the implementation in architecture of "the most diverse precedents" and the development of a student's personal position — as distinct from a position assimilated from accepted authorities — why were certain approaches to design consistently denigrated when they appeared in students' work? More importantly, why did some students seem to be being consistently subjected to public humiliation by certain staff during presentation of their work?

When such questions are asked, the possibility arises that what went on at Toronto after 1968 was, for some, not so much educational reform as the building of a little empire. It would, of course, be naïve to suggest that empire-building, hypocrisy and the establishment of a party line are unusual in schools of architecture. But what was unusual at Toronto was, first, the degree of disparity between the idealism of its rhetoric and the student's actual everyday experience in the school; and, concomitantly, the degree to which the teaching of architecture suffered in the course of the empire's construction.

The empire at Toronto was built on and sustained by myths rather than pedagogical content. First and foremost among these myths was that of architect as creative genius: heroic, intuitive and original rather than rational, explicit and catholic. It is ironic that in North America we owe this myth most of all to the self-promotional efforts of Frank Lloyd Wright, who always suffered neglect at the hands of the New Programme's ideologues. It is even more ironic given the New Programme's professed disdain for "prima donna-ism. Yet Wright's legacy was taken up by Louis Kahn, whose "sincerity" went over better at the school, especially considering his influence on Hertzberger and van Eyck, while Le Corbusier's Nietzschean visions of grandeur were part and parcel of his role in the school's mythology as chief deity and role model.

The myth, as it affected the student at Toronto on a day-to-day basis, had the further function of establishing a set of criteria by which he would be judged. It first manifested itself in the admissions process; conventional standards of evaluation (high school marks or previous university studies) were to be disregarded in favour of the results of an interview and the examination of a portfolio, which together would reveal whether or not an applicant "had what it takes". This mysterious and indefinable "certain something" was often outwardly indicated, so it seems, by a certain naïveté. Such were the first indications, in the Programme's mythology, of a deeply entrenched anti-intellectualism, and a variation on Rousseau's notion of the Noble Savage. A clarity of insight born of child-like innocence was to be aspired to; an "insight" undistorted by the artificialities of consumerist society.

But this did not mean that craftsmanship and hands-on experience were necessarily to be considered laudable qualities in a student. Within the programme, the myth was sustained and elaborated: crudeness (a "rude vigour", perhaps) in one's graphic work and some suggestion of profound inner struggle were much to be desired, in the view of some of the more influential staff. Icons and anti-icons were co-opted to the task of reinforcing the myth: every year it was proclaimed that Matisse was manly, Aubrey Beardsley effete, Mies an anal retentive and Corbusier vigorous and vital. Approved precedents were, however, rarely analyzed rigorously in terms of their formal principles — their grammar and syntax — but only described, in terms of the (dubious) implications for human behaviour within them.

For, as has been said, the roots of the Programme's ideology lay in Team X "Behaviourism". The fallaciousness of the Behaviourist doctrine has been dealt with elsewhere. It would be inappropriate to take up the case again, because in fact the New Programme did not even deal with Team X principles rigorously, but clouded their formal implications with its own myths.

Acceptance by students of the myth of genius allowed the Programme to claim that architecture could not be taught but only inspired. Either a student "had what it takes" or he didn't; and if he didn't, there wasn't much that could be done by the school. Any suggestion that, for his tuition, a student might expect to receive formal instruction in methods and skills was likely to be answered, "Surely you don't want to be spoon-fed?". Apparent deficiencies in a student's work could thus always be attributed to a personal weakness, not to a lack in his training. In addition, it could always be claimed that he had not sought the help of the "resource persons" when he ought to have done so, or indeed that he had not realized that he needed to seek it.

Within the rhetoric of the New Programme, it became extremely difficult, if not impossible, to attribute deficiencies in a student's work to anything other than his own shortcomings — not to the Programme's actual lack of content, for example, nor to actual incompetence on the part of the staff. The student was encouraged to believe that the New Programme existed as a mechanism within which he would achieve competence in architectural design only, so long as he was willing to commit himself to becoming a more "open", "straightforward" and "confident" person. If he was told

that he had failed to achieve this competence — and the staff, though "peers" in an "open-ended probe", were still judges of that — he had only himself to blame. In this way, a second myth — the myth of character — was introduced, and linked to the first.

A document presented to the Fourth Year class of 1973-74 by its Co-ordinator, entitled *Towards a Contract for Assessment*, makes the situation clear:

Although we are engaged in professional education, inevitably we are concerned with our own development. That is to say architecture, like everything else, reflects the values of its creators and so assessment should deal with our values as they can be manifested through our work.

What we are trying to do then, it seems to me, is to articulate those values we admire in people (and, therefore architects, and ultimately, buildings)... The values then that I can admire can, for the start, conveniently be taken from Bertrand Russell. They are vitality, courage, sensitivity and intelligence. I believe they are manifested in architecture just as they are in any other aspect of life. The work you undertake in a Core Problem will inevitably reveal your character when looked at in these lights.

(It is significant that, although called a "contract", the document nowhere specifies the Co-ordinator's responsibilities).

In such documents as these, and in countless unrecorded extempore monologues in reviews of student work, the switch was made by sophistic sleight-of-hand from the discussion of the discipline of Architecture to the discussion of character. Many students willingly accepted this. After all, this was a university school of architecture, and it was not entirely unreasonable for students to assume, at least in their early years at the school, that the staff were acting ethically and in good faith, with the students' best interests in mind insofar as the teaching of architecture was concerned.

Yet it seems that there was never much question raised over the fact that the educational principles most often cited as being fundamental to the New Programme were derived from texts on the education of children, not adults. Russell's four qualities of character were those he hoped to inculcate in children attending his Beacon House School. A.S. Neill's Summerhill was frequently presented as a model for the New Programme, as was David Holbrook's *The Exploring Word*, dealing with the teaching of poetry to children as a means of engendering (Holbrook's) moral values in them. These ideological references become all the more significant given that Aldo van Eyck's seminal work was a building for children: the Orphanage in Amsterdam. In the same way, Hertzberger's Montessori Primary School and Kindergarten in Delft, considered by its architect as a machine for developing "identity" in its occupants, is the model for all his other projects. And, indeed, it is no accident that the New Programme's First Year Core Problem was the design of a summer camp for children; nor, indeed, that the Second and Third Year Cores, in their original format, carried unmistakable overtones of summer vacations ("Oasis" — a highway motel — and "Resort"); and that the Fourth Year Core Problem, "Education", involved the design of facilities to house "progressive" child education programmes — Montessori, for example. The New Programme thus contained its automatic justification, and its own mechanism of indoctrination. The presence of such a mechanism explains in part why the Programme was able to survive for so long without internal revolt.

Myth substituted for content; beliefs (quasi-religious, pseudo-Leftist) substituted for ideas; a cult, in effect, substituted for teaching: this was the charlatanism of the New Programme. Let us hypothesize that, for some of its more unscrupulous participants, the purpose of the New Programme may have been to engender a situation in which they — who were being paid to teach — would be able to relieve themselves of the responsibility of actually teaching. As a "resource person", an unscrupulous staff member

who aligned himself with the New Programme could, if he chose, relinquish all conventional pedagogical duties of organizing and conveying content — and suffer no penalty. As a “peer” to student, drawing on his “experience as a man”, and declaring himself opposed to intellectualism (as being effete, and synonymous with Rightist formalism), he could further relinquish all responsibilities of undertaking scholarly research. To be sure, desk crits and juries — the essence of any design studio — would still be his responsibility. But with the myth of creative genius in force, an incompetent tutor would not appear incompetent. Such a situation would become self-perpetuating: the less active and well-read a staff member might be, or become, the more it would become necessary to keep the student ignorant in order to maintain minimal credibility as a “resource person”. Under such circumstances, teaching would be the very thing a teacher would have to avoid doing: vagueness would become the order of the day.

Furthermore, since the Core Problem was not based on a specific and realistic brief, the staff member would never be obliged, in juries to appraise a project in terms of such a programme (implicitly revealing his own design abilities, or lack of same), but only in a descriptive and *ad hoc* manner. For some, the sooner they could steer the discussion from architectural matters in to a commentary on the student's personality and values as (supposedly) readable from his work, the better. Since a student was obliged to construct his own brief for each project, and since, in the New Programme, reviews (juries) were intended to criticize a design in terms of its “intentions”, he would, more often than not, get it at both ends. For those non-cultists who had taught themselves how to programme, how to design and how to draw, the reviews were not so much pedagogical instruments as potential psychodramas, in which they risked undergoing vindictive and destructive personal attacks. And since the staff member was required, if acting as Year Co-ordinator, to be accountable for an evaluation of a student's work only once in an entire year (at the end, as ‘Honours’, ‘Pass’ or ‘Fail’ only), the Co-ordinator would not be obliged by the Programme's structure to present a substantial, consistent and justifiable attitude to that work in the course of the year.

Indeed, under such circumstances, it would be in the student's best interests to ingratiate himself with his Year Co-ordinator in any way he could. The absence of marks on individual stages of the Core Problems — and thus the absence of any structure of staff accountability through the course of each year, until the very end — seems to have constituted another mechanism of victimization in the New Programme. It was also for this reason that the much-vaunted staff-student parity on the school's Council was of no more than rhetorical value. With staff members holding absolute power over a student's future in the school, free speech on his part was hardly advisable, and any real student-initiated change to the Programme hardly feasible. This was the second major reason for the Programme's longevity.

Thus, dissenting students could find themselves in a truly Kafkaesque situation. Without letter grades or numerical marks it became difficult to transfer to another school. No matter how good their work might be (by outside standards and through self-directed study and work experience), it was constantly in danger of being subjected to ideological condemnation (especially if well-drawn). Since it was only officially marked once each year, their security in the programme was constantly in doubt.

In the second half of the '70's, the situation altered somewhat, in that a split began to occur between the first three years of the Programme and the last two. New staff, and old staff willing to pursue new directions, gravitated towards the upper years, and students who had until that point been teaching themselves saw the possibility of support and encouragement. Competing ideological positions began to assert themselves, and those who adhered to the old faith fared less consistently well than they had previously. The period from about 1976 to 1981 became known to some as The Big Thaw, when some of the school's best work was produced; but after 1981, things seemed to be getting cold again.

In fact, the new faces had not lasted long. Confronted with the Core Problem's built-in resistance to a pluralism of approaches, and with the antagonism of the New Programme's ideologues (who still held power in the lower years, but now saw that power fading), the recent arrivals sought more respectable and accommodating opportunities elsewhere. In addition, a change in administration in 1981 had precipitated a crisis among those long-term faculty who were more open-minded. The *laissez-faire* attitude of the “Thaw” period had given way to confrontational tactics that favoured the New Programme's own old guard. In protest, a boycott of upper-year staff ensued. Such was the situation confronting the Department's Acting Dean when he took up the appointment.

It was the cold of provincialism that he found to be regaining a hold on the school. It was a cold that for year had not allowed pluralism to flourish, but had enabled dogmas of the 1950's to remain grotesquely preserved, immune to the current of discourse and change that was going on elsewhere on the international scene. Now, in early 1983, the future of the school is an open question. It is the intention of this paper to provoke open debate on the effects and implications of the New Programme. Through such a debate, the recent history of the school may be further clarified, and present choices facing it and other Canadian schools may become clearer.

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SITE STUDIES: THE TERRAIN OF IDEOLOGY

This is the landscape of war
Shards and stumps and Broken Men
By the wayside
As metaphor of some truth, hidden.
This is the climate of battle
Tundra taken for granted
And shivering
Each individual out in the cold
Like wounded birds
Left behind in winter.
This is the whimper inaudible
Existent, reverberating
As if something someone said
At one moment
Might have meaning at another
Or forever.

And so there was a cause
And so people took it up
For fear, for vengeance
For lack of better things to do,
To give their lives meaning.

Someone whispered in my ear
Architecture is my love
Now we are comrades in the field.

Luigi Ferrara

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