

Interview with Stephen

Fong



Stephen Fong est présentement le directeur de l'école d'architecture à l'Université de Toronto. Le 17 novembre 1986, à Toronto, il accordait une entrevue à Michel Gingras et Peter Smale. Depuis, il a été décidé que l'école d'architecture de l'Université de Toronto serait réformée et rebaptisée sous le nom de l'école des sciences et du design architectural.

Stephen Fong is the acting director of the School of Architecture at the University of Toronto. On November 17, 1986, Prof. Fong was interviewed by Michel Gingras and Peter Smale in Toronto. Since the interview, a decision has been made to reorganize the school of architecture at U of T under a new designation as the School of Architectural Science and Design.

TFC: Briefly, would you describe your own educational background.

SF: I actually started in art and switched to architecture. I did a Bachelor of Architecture degree at Cornell, which is a five year program, and then I went on to do a Masters of Architecture and Urban Planning at Cornell. One of the features of that particular program that has probably stuck with me in terms of my orientation is that we were a faculty of architecture, art, and planning. I suppose from that experience I've always had the bias for the idea that architecture should be seen as part of the liberal arts, as part of humanist education, and specifically the relationship to art is apparent to me.

TFC: In the September 1986 issue of *Canadian Architect*, you stated that the pedagogical goals of architecture are not easily defined given that it is a creative discipline where critical questioning of philosophical orientation constantly occurs. You went on to describe the present situation as a shift to a 'post-modern' curriculum, or as a more broadly-based education. Could you define and elaborate on the idea of the "post-modern" curriculum?

SF: I think that the analogy would be to what we would call the post-modern city. By the post-modern city I think we are talking about the kind of city that respects the history of the city, the history of its districts, and has an under-

standing of its institutions and how they fit in. And in order to work within the context of the city like that, you need a fairly broad-based education. You need to understand the mechanisms, be they social, political, formal, visual, that make a city work. So it's in that sense that I see that a post-modern education is geared toward the idea of how we make the post-modern city. Maybe I should elaborate on what is the post-modern versus the modern city. For me, the modern city is the one where say thirty years ago we felt as architects that we could knock down districts, we could invent a new world. All we needed was our own formal language for that, and our own intuitions exclusive of the existing environment. In that scenario, I don't think a broad-based education was considered to be so important. But if you are to be sensitive and recognize everything that is happening around you in the city, you do need that kind of educational base. If the modern city was based on scientific precepts, then the post-modern city should be based on humanistic precepts.

TFC: More specifically, how do you see the curriculum being redirected now as compared to the curriculum which existed prior to 1968 and, later, during the New Program as introduced by Peter Pragnell?

SF: That is a difficult question. Certainly there are pieces of each program which overlap and each program that has gone through U of T has taught some things that are essential to prepare different generations of architects. But what is happening in terms of the direction now is the idea that there are a certain number of technical skills and technical issues that have to be dealt with with the students. It is part of the responsibility of this school to the society at large to help in that kind of training. Then there is the question of aesthetic delight and of trying to make a better environment. That probably amounts to what might be called tuning the eye. If music is about tuning the ear and going through that whole pedagogical process to arrive at that point, architecture is partially about tuning the eye.

TFC: You've partly answered this question, but how do you feel that a school should deal with the dichotomy between technical training and the aesthetic and intellectual development of the students?

SF: Well, I suppose that relates to what you see as your vision of architecture. At least my bias, and I think that of a number of my colleagues here, is a bias that architecture is about built work. Since with built work the medium is materials, structure, etc., then I think that architectural education has to be



about helping people to think in terms of that medium. For instance, if you train a musician on an instrument, he's got to know the technical skills required to make the sound which is ultimately the art. With architectural training, we have to talk about exploring ideas, and how materials translate and make ideas. It is to that extent that technical knowledge is important as part of the curriculum of architectural education.

TFC: Does the evolution of an architectural curriculum, such as that which U of T has been undergoing in the last 5 years, simply respond to changing architectural ideas in society or do, and should, curriculum changes anticipate these changes?

SF: As best possible, they should anticipate those changes, but I think we've got to back away from an old vision we had as architects 20 or 30 years ago that architects lead society, that somehow they've got an intellectual machetté and they could cut through the thicket of the unknown to lead society on to something. That kind of heroic posture has gotten us into a lot of trouble. Clearly architects have turned around after wading through this jun-

gle and seen that society is not following. It is even questionable whether architects were going in the right direction. Maybe, more accurately, what we should be saying is that there should be some kind of reciprocal passing of knowledge and ideas back and forth. That is part of the ideal of post-modern education. Architects need to be involved in a dialogue with all disciplines where issues are discussed concerning where we are going in society. For example, the term 'post-modern' is really as much a phrase of the liberal arts in all of its branches as it is of architecture. In fact it has different meanings in other disciplines where it's not so much associated with a style or with a return to nineteenth century form or whatever but rather with a notion of a wholistic vision of the world. So I think that answers your question in a different way. We're part of a dialogue about where society is going and to a certain extent we try some experiments which might result in interesting ideas coming about. But we're not in that heroic period of change. I think we really have to understand when we can make realistic contributions as architects.

TFC: And that attitude is more than a simple reactionary response?

SF: No, I think it's not a matter of just following; it's a matter of, in certain instances, recognizing opportunities, say opportunities of structure of a city or organizations that are latent in the environment, and doing something about them.

TFC: You've said that given the nature of architectural pedagogy, schools of architecture have to be forums for debate over the direction architectural education. Over the last decade, U of T has been embroiled in such a debate. Is this really a positive process within a school, and at what point does such debate become unhealthy to the welfare of a school?

SF: To answer the questions in order, I think it is positive. Any school which sees itself as a kind of broadly based university education must have that kind of dialogue; it's a prerequisite of education to have that meeting of ideas. Perhaps that word 'meeting' is a good word to begin the second question with because that's what a dialogue has got to be. It has to be a discussion and a meeting of ideas, a dialogue that's based on a mutual respect for a number of positions. Perhaps the school becomes unhealthy if one set of ideas gets submerged completely.

TFC: There is the politics of public relations, however, that requires that the public perceives such debate as orderly and constructive. Even though a forum of vigorous debate may create a good educational environment, it may produce a public image of a school

which is politically unacceptable. Specifically then, is there a way to discipline the forum so that in the public view the debate seems positive and orderly?

SF: Well, that's one of the great difficulties. I don't think there can be explicit policies. It almost comes down to a case of personalities and individuals, and how they interact. If you hear discussions of schools that were in a good state, it's really a discussion of chemistry, chemistry of people and how they work together and the kind of dialogues that go on. It's a somewhat magical situation where people are talking and there's intellectual activity going on in a healthy way.

TFC: In spite of the threat to close U of T, is there such a debate going on to promote a healthy evolution of ideas within the school?

SF: One of the problems at U of T is that we have a situation where people are competing for a small budget. The budget has been cut year after year after year and you get to a point where you wonder "can you have a truly pluralistic dialogue? Can you have all these voices heard here when you're in a situation where you've got to make the department lean and work in a very efficient way?" At times when there is a lot of money around, things can work fine. You can have a whole bunch of voices, you don't have to have everyone carry a full studio, and that can be very interesting. But then it costs a bit more money to run that type of program. If you have a situation where every teacher here is putting in their maximum amount of teaching, then you have difficulty when people are voicing unpopular ideas. As much as one would want to have that dialogue as part of the university, that doesn't work under the scenario of efficiency.

TFC: Does that say something about the way architectural education is perceived by other academic fields, educational administrators and the professional community? Is the nature of architectural education understood by those outside the profession? For instance, there has been criticism raised about the quality of the teaching staff at U of T based on the volume of research work published. This is an accepted standard for measuring academic quality in other fields but does it apply equally to architecture?

SF: I think that partially relates to the problem of architecture in Canada in that there is not a tremendous audience for reading things about architecture, and for the architectural discourse. As a consequence, there are not that many publications. If you look at the publications which exist in North America, most of them are in the U.S. They involve a group of people who always



write for those journals, and it's very difficult for younger people to break into that circuit of writing. I think that at this time there are not the mechanisms to allow for that kind of research to be done in Canada. Compounded with that, there is very little money for research. If you look at the dollars available for architects doing design related work, you see that compared to anything, compared to engineering, compared to grants in creative writing, etc., there is probably very, very little. The Canada Council has only, I think within the last two years, recognized architecture as a separate division. Where is the money coming from to do these kinds of things? So by one of the university's parameters of success, 'dollars brought into the department', it's an impossible question because the money isn't there. We should recognize that most people who are advanced in design want to do design related research. They're not going after the computer dollars or the building science dollars; they're going after dollars related to their own area of specialization. Those dollars aren't available in this country, number one, and, number two, if they were and, if

they did work, the outlets to publish the material are not available.

TFC: The question of tenureship and whether it should exist at all in schools of architecture often comes up. What are your feelings on that subject?

SF: I think that some of the people who I have respected the most at other schools are older, tenured people who provide a kind of institutional memory to the school, who have made a career out of thinking about architecture and are very well respected in both the academic and professional worlds. Because of that, I'm a person who supports tenure when used properly. I think of great teachers in North America such as Louis Kahn, Vincent Scully and Colin Rowe, and certainly with these people, there is no question that if they want to stay at a school and tenure is a way to get them to continue to teach, then that's what is necessary. It's important in some cases to maintain a tenure system.

TFC: Once again you're saying there is no recipe for the use of tenure yet it is often quoted as the source of many difficulties.

SF: That's one of the problems of a school and you hear this all the time in discussions about schools: "Well that school over-tenured in a certain period of time." And, therefore, the school goes into a period of decline because they've tenured the wrong people or whatever. I don't think that is necessarily an indictment of tenure as a system. It might be that in a particular case it was not the most far-sighted use of tenure at a particular time.

TFC: Finally, do you think current academic training of architects, particularly at U of T, and in general across Canada, is preparing them for the 21st century or for the changes we are going to witness in the future?

SF: We are beginning to do that but we have a long way to go. We have a lot of thinking to do about how that is to be done. I was at a conference last week where there was debate on that subject in general architectural terms. The discussion centered on the idea that the move towards specific technical training is a problem at this point, that newer directions should be toward redevelopment of humanist liberal arts education because it trains thinkers rather than people who know specific techniques. We've got a lot of thinking to do on how that is to be done, but clearly that should be one of our goals. ■

Michel Gingras and Peter Smale are second year architecture students at McGill University.