

Architectural Education — one way or the other?

by John Meunier

A search for commitment to explanation, action and understanding in architectural education...

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WHEN I FINALLY convinced my parents that I did not want to be an accountant, a profession that they knew was valued by society and appropriately remunerated, it was agreed that we should look into my education to be an architect. Their natural reaction was to find a local architect to whom I might be 'articled'. This was a form of apprenticeship in which a young man, straight out of high school, joined a professional's firm to work and to learn under his guidance. For that privilege the young man paid a 'premium' which distinguished him from the paid assistants as someone who had the right to expect some more or less structured education directly from his "principal". It was the normal mode of education not only in architecture but in most professions well into the twentieth century, and particularly for accountants.

When we visited a local architect, with the intention of negotiating my 'articles', he gently drew my parents' attention to the fact that only sixteen miles away was the Liverpool University School of Architecture, the first University School of Architecture in Great Britain and, as I was later to find out, the school where James Stirling had been studying under Colin Rowe. So I missed the opportunity to learn architecture from the vantage point of a practitioner, a system under which most of the architects of the past learned their trade, and found myself for the next seven years learning it in schools at two Universities, Liverpool and Harvard. Slipped in between there were a few months of 'internship' with firms in London and New York, remnants of the old system, but on the whole, like most of my readers, my formal education was in 'Schools of Architecture'.

I started at my first School when I

was just seventeen. I built my first building when I was twenty-eight. For eleven years architecture was for me primarily drawings, models, photographs, and words, whose relationship to the experiential reality of buildings only occasionally came to life, as when I visited the newly finished Jaoul houses in Neuilly and the Hollyhock house in Los Angeles.

Now I find myself running a School of Architecture and Interior Design, which admittedly is closer to the 'articles' system of education than my own was, because of the cooperative education method used here, but which perpetuates the tradition of an academic preparation. For most of my students, too, architecture is primarily drawings, models, photographs, and words.

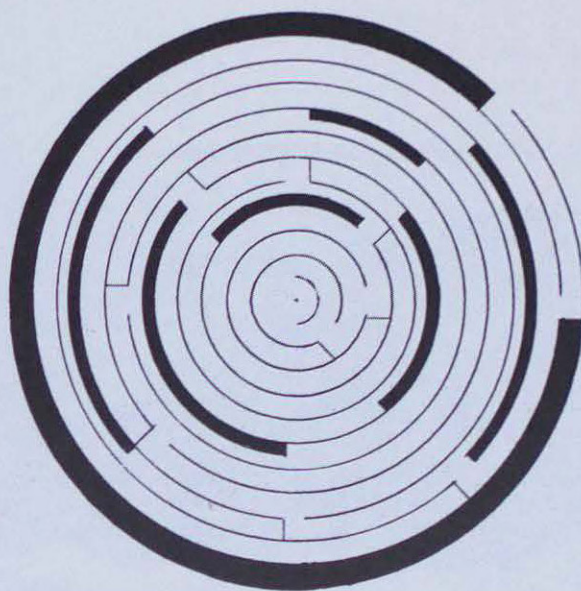
The question I ask myself is, "Is this a defensible method, on any grounds other than economic?"; because it is clearly cheaper to have students pay a few thousand dollars to make their mistakes on paper than it is to have them make them for real with buildings that would cost many thousands of dollars and at the end of the day be too dangerous, ugly or useless to keep.

My answer to my own question is a very qualified "yes". I have two major qualifications which, if they are ignored, leave me with very serious doubts as to the value of an academic education for architecture. One qualification demands the clear-eyed recognition of its limitations, the other demands a recognition of its potential virtue. If either, or both, are ignored I have little faith that anything other than harm is being done to one who wishes to become an architect.

First it must be recognized that those drawings, models, photographs and words are **not** architecture. They may

have the capacity to make us think of architecture, but each is strictly limited in its capacity to represent architecture. Let me use the word 'model' in a more precise sense. Each of these are 'models' of architecture. Models are valuable. They are usually manipulable and testable. They select the characteristics you might wish to study. They are economic in terms of time, effort, and resource. But by definition they cannot represent all the characteristics of the object to which they relate. If they did they would no longer be models, they would be the object itself. It is essential that we recognize the limitations of these 'models' of architecture. We must learn to relate them to the reality they represent in the same way that a musician can learn to hear the music when he reads a score. We must resist their capacity to seduce us as aesthetic objects in their own right. The musician is fortunate in that he is unlikely to mistake the beauty of the graphics of a score for the beauty of the music; we all too often succumb. He also has the advantage, as long as he has not written a piece for a full orchestra and a thousand voices, that the transformation of his score into music will not be too time consuming and expensive. We usually have to wait many years before our designs assume their architectural reality in any substantial way.

It is therefore of great importance that a student of architecture learns the conventions of the relationship; between his 'models' and reality. That can be achieved in two ways: by building some of his designs, and by reversing the normal sequence by making 'models' of buildings which already exist. For me it is vitally important that as early as possible in a student's career he builds or has built **at full size** something architectonic that he has designed. Inevitably it has to be small and cheap, probably no bigger than a tent,



a porch, a gazebo, or a room, but even that will give him the fulfillment of realizing technically the implications of his design work. He will experience it with all his senses and understand the aesthetic significance of construction, detailing, and workmanship. Problems of economics and time and process will impinge on his design intentions.

'Measured drawings' used to be a part of the syllabus of every architecture program. Under the Beaux Arts it usually meant the re-drawing of a major monument from a survey which required you to crawl all over it. By the time I did it we were recording the cast-iron nineteenth century buildings of Liverpool. There are clear benefits from this process of the reduction of experiential reality back to drawings. More recently in schools with strong Building Science curricula surveys now include the measurement of building performance in ways other than the visual and spatial. Light, sound, temperature, humidity, and energy usage are also reduced to "models".

These few comments then about the limitations of architectural education in a university and what we might do to counteract them. What about the advantages? The major advantage of the ambience of the University should be its traditions of 'explanation'. The University is devoted to 'understanding'. If we work within its traditions we should end up by 'understanding' architecture. We would

use science to understand it in one way, and history to understand it in another. We might even attempt to understand it philosophically.

There is an aspect of most architectural curricula called 'theory'. There are some schools that don't have it at all, there are others that have very little else. What is it? Anything that doesn't fit into the technologies or history, but which should nonetheless be taught, is what it often is.

There are two kinds of theory, as I see it. There are theories of **explanation**, and there are theories of **action**. Universities usually concern themselves with the first. Schools of architecture usually concern themselves with the second. That is why architecture students are so different from most of the other students; why they are on the one hand envied and admired as men and women of creative action; and why on the other hand they are the butt of academic derision because they know so little, even about their own field.

The answer to my question, "Is the education of architecture students in a University defensible?" is, as I said a highly qualified "yes". Yes, but only if the experiential reality of architecture is clearly kept in sight, and; yes, but only if the drive towards the explanation and understanding of the world, which is normal to the university, is sustained. Which is not to say that as places

where designers are educated schools of architecture do not have a duty to teach theories of action. Of course they do, but they are likely to be no more than recipes to reproduce the most recent cliché if they are not based upon the principles of intellectual understanding.

If my son were to ask me how he should become an architect, would I put him in 'articles' or in a University School of Architecture? The choice would not be automatic. If I could find a Street or a Soane, a Pugin or a Schinkel, I would be tempted. I would probably resist however and send him to a University School, but I'd have a good look at their curriculum first. If all I found was a large scale apprenticeship to a bunch of second-rate principals disguised as University professors then I would dig into my pocket and pay the 'premium' for the 'articles'. If I found a genuine University department, committed to explanation as well as action, and a design education which understood and controlled the relations between 'models' and reality, then I would happily surrender him to the academy.

The ideal, of course, is the combination, where the student is close to the creative world of a leading practitioner who happens to be a member of a University faculty which sustains the scholarly traditions of the university. Would that all Schools of Architecture were like that. □