

Critical Observations on the Book:
Monitoring Architectural Design
Education in European Schools
of Architecture

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"we found parts but not the whole...."

Paul Klee on Modern Art

The contributors to the book, *Monitoring Architectural Design Education in European Schools of Architecture*, share a passion for architecture and a commitment to teaching. Its readers will probably share that passion and look for inspiration and support in its pages. They will find it. Perhaps some readers will approach this book thinking that the book promotes a tendency towards a common curriculum. There is still abroad a ghost – a "European agenda" for architectural education that equates convergence of purpose with promotion of uniformity. Ghost hunters will find little comfort in this book.

The introduction contains a brief editorial statement about its purpose: its aim is to "...offer particular information about different teaching paradigms" (strategies, methods and content) and to "...facilitate the exchange of ideas and research". The authors were invited to structure their contributions around four concerns: philosophy; pedagogy; the design exercises and an appraisal of the programmes/projects undertaken. My contribution to the review of its contents began with an attempt to grasp and describe to myself the scope and content of the contributions. The editors' grouping of the papers into broad categories, Initiations, Articulations and Advancements, reflecting different levels or stages within architectural education, was a useful starting point.

Was it possible to come to some general conclusions regarding the present position of architectural education in Europe through the contributions here? Not at all. This should not be surprising - the table below illustrates just how partial an insight one could achieve.

Number of Responses							
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	
Number of Countries							
1	-	1	2	-	7	7	18

Fig. 1: Table showing distribution of contributions

But it was possible to identify some of the principal drivers behind the papers, and to understand the educational ideas and pedagogical methods employed in the programmes described. This paper concentrates on this area and concludes with some reflections on architectural education that were prompted by what I had read.

The editor characterises the book's contents as "polyphony" – it is a description that suggests a shared common melodic theme (1). The theme is as elusive as a definition of architectural education – perhaps one could say that the multiple variations suggest that a common theme is there to be found. If my experience of reading it is a guide, the reader will struggle to find it. The book is demanding – the individual chapters require concentration and finding commonalities virtually impossible. Even if one confined oneself to certain limited parameters as a basis for comparison, one found that the variations meant that any direct juxtaposition served no purpose. For example, the length of programmes described ranged from forty-two weeks to six, and the hours devoted each week to programmes ranged from twenty to four. Direct comparisons could make no sense, nor could one expect simple patterns.

My search for commonalities or patterns led me to a different way of understanding the book as a whole – that it was an assembly of over-lapping themes and preoccupations that somehow reflected many of the concerns of architectural education, while providing "worked examples" of how particular programmes addressed them. It was not to be understood as representing completeness in any sense – it was a survey only in as much as a glimpse through a keyhole gives information about what's inside the door, and clearly there are explorations in architectural design teaching that are not reflected in this book. The key to its value lies in accepting its

incompleteness, so that individual contributions can get the attention they deserve. So it was possible to make out some preoccupations, some animating factors that suggested different kinds of coherence of intent and method.

Preoccupations/animating factors

The approaches I encountered in the essays were driven by four broad preoccupations: they addressed preparation for professional life; they set about awakening/ cultivating creative response; they were concerned with the exposition of theoretical/ polemical constructs, and/or they comprised detailed programmatic description. While these were the labels I put on the contributions, it would also be true to say that these labels were not exclusively the property of any single contribution – most contributions had more than one. A case in point is the contribution of _aglar and Uludag (2). The concepts put forward are beautiful and the programme is also characterised by hard-edged practicality. In almost every case however, one or other of these characters dominated.

Preparation for professional life was the single most pervasive characteristic. Not surprising perhaps, but within that broad orientation, there was a range of approach that reflected very different sets of perspectives on what such preparation meant and consequently differing intentions for the programmes. I labelled these approaches as contextual, challenging, test bench and integrating.

In the contextual approaches, the project structure reflects fairly explicitly the range of concerns in architectural design from conception to the realisation of a building. The programme described by Balogh is a good example (3). Projects in this category are typically concerned with the constraints and opportunities of real sites, and the end product that is sought for mirrors "real world" requirements (eg. Hacıhasanoglu)(4). In these programmes there is clear emphasis on ensuring that students develop identified architectural skills such as representation, model-making, plan development and constructional strategies (eg. Floet)(5). It was somewhat surprising that the role and potential of digital media did not receive more concerted attention, with Grant's essay the only contribution that described a programme centrally focussed in this area (6).

Among the programmes centrally concerned with preparation for professional life were some that I labelled "challenging", in that they sprang from a critique of real world issues as these are commonly understood (Wiley and Gilbert-Scott)(7). This grouping comprised a rich and varied spectrum. Some embraced social issues such as design for universal access (Froyen) (8), while others explored the relationship between architecture and society through projects with a clear critical agenda, such as questioning the apparent dichotomy between reality and creativity – is it possible for the architect to be both socially responsive and to enjoy freedom of creative expression at the same time (Parnell)(9)? Yet another strand took a "test bench" approach in which various parameters set by real world situations were subjected to structured and intense examination in the design studio.

Finally, certain professionally orientated programmes set themselves an agenda of integrating diverse concerns within a consciously holistic pedagogic framework, taking the view that in this way, professional skills could be best developed. Two examples will serve to illustrate the range of approaches here. The first represents a kind of programmatic interplay. The contribution entitled *Origins: Introductory Studio Projects for the Study of Architecture* (10) starts from the determination to regard studio education as a place where educational objectives and subject areas are addressed. The introductory programme described by Ronnefalk uses the continuous production of work as a tool for reflection, with the instructors adopting a role that enables students to develop their own approaches (11). Here the outcomes are deliberately open-ended, again with the conviction that skills thus learned are central to architectural practice.

The second broad category of programme driver was the concern for awakening/ cultivating the creative response of the student. This kind of programme is close to everyone's heart: programmes whose approach is grounded in pedagogical experiment and where the excitement

of exploration and uncertainty bursts through the inevitable dryness of exposition encountered in any standardised format. One might say that all good teachers try to achieve that openness and excitement. This category reflects my recognition of the way some contributors chose to represent their intentions and their programmes. "What we seek is not a relearning of cultural codes, but letting the students rediscover the basic spatial experiences they have built into their bodies since childhood". This optimistic and affirming sentence is taken from *Structure, Space and Form*, and the description of the programme goes on to connect this internal spatialisation with the landscape of Norway and the inhabitants of its western sea edge (12). Its pedagogic approaches appeal directly to body awareness, using concepts such as the "silent language of space" to evoke an impression of activities with the power to engage students at many levels. Imaginative metaphorical constructs, involvement with the outside community, the conscious use of "play" as a learning tool and involvement with physical materials in constructing shelter, produced an emphasis on learning through a rich experience. Other contributions of course, had analogous ideas. The open studio idea as enacted by the Eastern Mediterranean University School, with the conscious interplay of approaches to programmes addressing actual problems suggested a similar richness (13). The language the authors use to describe the desired studio atmosphere is evocative – words such as "active", "hospitable", "democratic" and "competitive" certainly grab the attention. Valenti's essay is notable in that it describes a multi-disciplinary approach and invokes various metaphorical constructs in the definition of its projects (14). Perhaps the real gain here is the power of these descriptions to evoke echoes in the reader's imagination and to prompt further investigation and experiment.

The third broad category of contribution comprised those that derived their content and methodology from explicitly established theoretical or polemical constructs. Conspicuous among them was *A Play with Architectural Textuality* which began with an exposition of constructs deriving from Derrida and which developed a discourse amenable to architectural exploration (15). To an extent this involves the students "acting out" the discourse and it would have been interesting to know more about the students' conclusions as a result of their experiences. Within this category also I had included those programmes that explicitly undertook an exploration of "design as research" (eg. Shotton, Betancour)(16), even though the content of programmes differed widely. I would include several of the contributions I placed in other categories in this one also – I have already cited the work of Caglar and Uludag in another context. It is possible to read those contributions that specifically addressed theoretical or polemical constructs against the viewpoint that architectural design, by its very nature, plays an ideological role in society. The point has been argued that, whether through construction or publication, architecture requires the operation of the market in order to achieve its cultural and social presence (17).

In one sense the fourth category is more precisely defined than the other three because it refers to the way in which the programmes are presented rather than to the intentions and purposes that generated them. In common with the other categories, this one includes programmes already classified under one or more of those already described. The category drew together diverse contributions that are characterised by their concentration on how the teaching is organised – the organisational sequencing of projects and teaching settings within the programme, orchestrated to achieve the desired outcome. In many cases the paradigm behind the programme was implicit, in others it was set out. In the case of the former, the focus tended to be on describing the narrative sequence of work and the outcomes that were sought. Examples of this approach are the contributions of Braatten, Boyd and Murphy and Katainen (18). Where the programmes were explicitly set out, they were almost embodiments of the theoretical positions adopted by the teachers involved.

"I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams"

W.B. Yeats

There is a great deal of intelligence, passion and commitment in the programmes described in this papers submitted. The collection is full of ideas and one wishes it had existed many years

ago. However, I could not avoid two critical observations, both couched in general terms as one must, given the partial insight it was possible to achieve.

Most of us confront a fundamental dilemma in architectural education: it lies in the relationship between teaching, criticism and evaluation. Making the transition from one mode of activity to the other certainly requires pedagogic skill, but it also requires empathy and honesty. Fundamentally it is an extension of a necessary sense of respect for the task, the role and the student. In my reading of the book, some essays displayed a notable respect for their students as individuals who were embarking on a challenging journey – and that demonstrated as well that teachers were aware of their own position and of their obligation to open windows, to inspire, to advise and guide. In others the sense was of a more "instrumental" approach – where the motivation seemed more one of instruction, of ensuring that objective criteria demanded by the world outside were met, and that necessary knowledge was passed on. Here the teacher was the possessor of knowledge and the student the one who lacked it. Needless to say, architectural education has to open windows, evoke inherent creativity and inculcate knowledge. The effectiveness of design studio teaching in any given context will depend on the priority assigned to these complementary purposes and the ability of the teacher to devise situations that embody them. Here there is no escape from the fact that the ends cannot be separate from the means – the means have to incorporate the desired end.

One of the most difficult issues in education is that of knowing if what one does "works", and the contributors to this book were also asked to reflect on that matter and to give an appraisal of their programmes, their successes and failures, and to suggest how things could be improved.

At this level there was little sight of insightful reflection and appraisal. Many authors did not undertake this exercise, and few did so in a way that portrayed a systematic approach to evaluation. Perhaps the contributors just did not report on what is being done. There were some notable exceptions. Earlier I said that some charismatic teachers operate on instinct and experience. Evaluation is not a particularly inviting task nor an inspiring idea, and it may be for some it sounds like the death knell for inspiration and spontaneity. Nonetheless, its absence is hard to justify from a professional perspective. In many institutions, design teaching is increasingly subject to the same pressures as other areas of academic activity. Quantification of student performance is demanded and architectural programmes are being asked about such matters as progression rates. More and more, students and administrators ask about the basis for assessment in the area of design. But there is more to the matter than that. Attention to programme evaluation provides some objective measures with which to develop pedagogic methods.

Returning to the contributions in the book under review, it is also notable that the student voice was almost entirely absent from the appraisals where they existed at all. Clearly there is scope for a focussed investigation by teachers of architectural design into the evaluation of studio teaching. Such an investigation, by exploring what questions are asked and how the answers are incorporated into new programmes, would strengthen the position of studio teaching in the academies of the twenty-first century.

Some reflections on learning

Inevitably, a book like this will be examined from the perspective of its meaning for architectural education. The intention of the book was not to articulate a position, but to permit the readings to stimulate reflection on architectural education and perhaps to provide inspiration. For this reader they did stimulate reflection, although not in the way I had expected. Those reflections did not lead me to form conclusions about the state of architectural education in Europe, but rather to speculate on the philosophy of education held by the authors. In some cases this was clear – in others I was not sure what the authors thought about the underlying nature of their transactions with their students. In particular I found myself trying to understand the programmes and projects in the book as learning experiences as opposed to teaching strategies. Either way, one has little knowledge of the wider context in which the programmes are set.

My effort was partly stimulated by the language used by some authors to explain what was being attempted. There are many inventive teachers who are interested in the world of psychology and the work of Piaget and Bruner crops up from time to time in essays on architectural education. But quite often, effective teachers seem to operate as much by instinct in devising their approaches as by reference to models of learning. Relatively few of us have the opportunity to explore in any depth the effectiveness of our methods apart from seeing the outcomes in the form of work produced by the students. I will return to that issue later on, but for the moment note that we can rarely draw firm conclusions about longer term impact on conceptual skills acquisition that might favour one set of approaches above other. We have much to be thankful for.

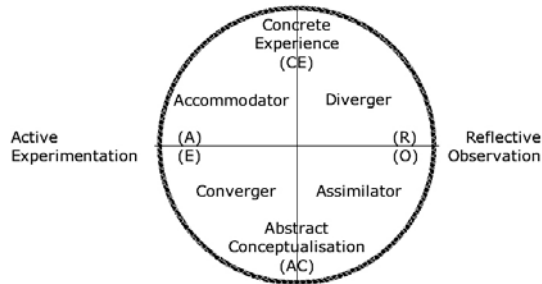


Fig. 2 Experiential learning and learning styles as envisaged by Kolb

Learning in architectural design involves a type of iterative process that evokes experiential learning as described by Kolb (19). To him also we owe the linked ideas of the "learning cycle" and of "learning styles". Kolb believed that experiential learning involved movement through identifiable phases of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation to test implications, leading to further concrete experience, and so on. In conjunction with that model, he put forward the idea that each person has their own way of learning, and that this unique process involves a blend of four types of learner, but in differing proportions. These learner types are the accommodator, the diverger, the assimilator and the converger. No one person embodies just one of these, but the salience of each differs from person to person so that a particular mode is dominant. The dominant mode is not necessarily fixed for all time. For the individual, a learning experience that taps into that mode is likely to be most easily absorbed.

It is a persuasive model of learning. So much is required of the architect in contemporary society that there is a temptation to pack as much as possible into a curriculum, to create apparent richness of experience through complexity of programme requirements. The skills in architectural design are complex: the ability to move between the material and the conceptual, between different scales, modes of representation and methods of investigation and testing are, I believe, acquired rather than taught. Bateson refers to the process through which a person acquires the ability to solve crossword puzzles – an abstract skill of relating contexts and recognising patterns (20). The skills are acquired as part of the process of learning, almost as a by-product of the tasks undertaken.

Such a model might imply that the would-be educator, aware that students learn in different ways and that learning to be creative is a central concern, would devise programmes that leave room to breathe, space for students to find their own way. As well as being somehow appropriate, such an approach leaves open the possibility for transcendence. Dalibor Vassilly coined the word "metaphoricity" to describe a quality of architectural creative thinking, that kind of thinking that invokes a poetic vision in the everyday experience. It is also a quality that animates creative teaching and produces learning experiences that linger in the memory and shape the imagination.



Fig. 3 Project for a breakwater on the West coast of Ireland

In conclusion

I began this paper by saying that readers that expect this book to support a move towards a common curriculum will be disappointed. But there is a European educational project - one that is altogether more difficult and more worthwhile than the development of a common curriculum. It is to establish a common understanding of the fact that diversity is the key to systemic stability and the ability to adapt to change. In this book the reader will find plenty of evidence of that.

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