

A Critical Reading of
Monitoring Architectural Design
Education in European Schools
of Architecture

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Informative

This is truly a book of good intentions, but it is always difficult to measure how well a book of this type is able to present an overall picture of architectural design education. There are many outside elements that will inevitably influence the author's comprehension of a design program but equally so the reader's interpretation of the presented material. This is a very serious work, straightforward in its explanations of what is going on in design education; *Monitoring Architectural Design* has clearly chosen to hold its subject matter within the confines of "monitoring". As a reader, the quality of the monitoring process becomes the focus, thus the anticipating future application and further development seems less clear.

Individual approach

The book reveals that there are a variety of approaches in the administration and pedagogy of design schools today, and that each school has its own particular focus.

Individuality as a quality

Certainly this individual approach in teaching has positive input for design pedagogy, but it also brings up a number of other signals about architecture. It is very difficult to find a common denominator within an approach, let alone a focus. Expectations of what architecture can and should achieve vary greatly and the definition of these expectations changes rapidly. The book clearly states that there is no common resistance force or platform, but rather a set of priorities that generates a myriad of programs.

A mix of language

We share an architectural terminology that is present in most of our programs, discussions and papers, but the individual definition of these terms varies greatly as they have been reinterpreted and given subjective or private meanings. The way we use our vocabulary offers variation in interpretation, but as the book states architectural written language also suffers from instability in that we no longer have a common design terminology.

A generation gap

One weakness with the book lies in understanding what the above changes have meant to the younger faculty and students. One has the feeling that "monitored material" relied far too much on a generation that still had a memory of a common architectural base or belief. It is true that age wise this cut may vary from country to country due to politics and cultural changes, but it does not lessen the importance of understanding this age gap and how the younger faculty views their own situation.

A course description

In adhering to the idea of "monitoring", the book becomes essentially a course description. A program and its results are presented, but what is difficult to gain from this material is the creative approach or process within the set program. This will not necessarily be reflected through a course description, nor will change the expectations which can become apparent in the straightforward result presentation. This problem is particularly true when considering the impact of the aforementioned generation gap.

Diversity

Is there a lack of ambition? Most seem complacent with their programs, but fall short in estab-

lishing a direction and a clear profile. The program can change, but the concurrent discussion on profile comes after the fact or simply does not occur with the same intensity.

The lack of a common resistance force

How to teach a subject so transient when its resulting product remains so constrained? Architectural education can be everything and nothing. In examining the book farther certain categories of pedagogical approach became apparent.

1. Schools that embrace a set tradition, outlook and method of how to become an architect
2. Schools that have their primary ambition to place students in the profession
3. Schools that place emphasis upon the understanding and development of architectural space and its theory
4. Schools that offer a little of everything

Confusion in argumentation

How can comparison work effectively in promoting an argumentation, when the comparison lacks an accepted or clearly understood common base?

Innovation and rare knowledge

Teaching "information" is perhaps the least important area of an architectural curriculum today. The most difficult area is probably related to innovative and rare knowledge. And to this end, the development of the student's method and the program content are pivotal in generating inspiration. To be able to focus on the creative process requires concentration and a more coherent understanding of motivation within this process.

Reflections on my teaching experiences at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design

In relation to any type of teaching or pedagogical profile, it is important to be able to communicate an understanding of the subject matter, but also to have a clear perception of the specific qualities and limits of the level at which you are teaching. To teach in a fifth year studio generates another type of pedagogical profile than that of teaching the first year. In order to communicate, some sort of a base comprehensible for both the teacher and student needs to be put in place.

Louis Kahn once said, "You can only teach that which is already within yourself". In relation to teaching in architecture, I interpret this to mean that each student and teacher have a particular given talent. But, this talent does not necessarily transform into creative ability. Only when events, knowledge or inspiration no matter how seemingly insignificant are able to connect to talent will creative ability come into its own. Teaching is opening existing pathways and channels to talent.

The idea of knowledge and how we gain knowledge has changed tremendously through the internet and other digital tools. To continue to teach knowledge within the same guidelines that existed for as little as 15 years ago is difficult, let alone search for a common platform for activity. Information is known, perhaps dated or up to date. It is available, but simply as information, and seldom reaches beyond the informative. Often this information is without limits or contour, and gains credibility or authority through a back-door situation.

It is very important that the task set before the student is on all levels a challenge, and through this the needed information and knowledge will also carry a clear challenge. Here lies the heart of a creative act as teacher. The way in which you write and form the semester program will not

only give a particular result but will also preclude others. From my own experience over the past years, the result of the course depends on how challenging the program is and where the challenge is placed. Most teachers deserve some critique on this point, since the quality of the program is rarely equated to a creative act, rather perceived as a formula or guideline for reaching a specific result.

Further, I have experienced that programs that manage a certain amount of openness and at the same time remain precise in their specific spatial investigation give latitude for student's personal interpretation, or even better, students are encouraged to form an argument that will eventually lead to a personal architectural voice. In a time where "right" or "wrong" in architecture no longer carry the same weight, the student's development and confidence in his or her personal architectural voice is essential.

It is important to create a good atmosphere in the studio, and this again requires a precise and creative stance. Since most work is now computer based and depends less upon a specific work place, the studio must function as a meeting place on all levels. The exchange between teacher /student and student/student has moved away from the drawing board as the center of interest to a multitude of focal points more or less outside of the classroom's domain. A vital part of the learning process are the informal discussions between students, but it is not a given that these conversations will include in depth discussions on architecture outside of the studio. In order for the semester program and teaching staff to reach a certain level of creative dialogue, the studio space itself needs to function as an open forum for architectural dialogue, hence it is important for lectures, critiques and other activities to occur in this space as much as possible.

In the same sense, it is important that the teachers work as a team in the studio, and that they have agreed upon and worked out the program in advance. If the teaching group has thoroughly discussed the program, and how each member of the group can best contribute to the semester far less energy is used in adjusting internal differences. If teachers have different opinions, this is perfectly acceptable and an important element, because the essential focus is the argumentation within the program, and it is this that has set the direction of the course and not a preconceived result or supposition. The variation of meanings expressed by the different teachers is a positive stimulation, since it is part of the investigation process of the program, but it does require respect and teamwork between teachers.

What do we teach?

We teach a basic understanding of architecture, what we believe architecture is, and how to achieve a focus or creative position in order to renew or adjust this understanding in relation to the future. Some of the basic concerns in our approach that continue to be important are a belief in architecture as space, or sequence of spaces, and actuated through physical presence and the earth's gravity.

There is also a belief that architecture has an identity of its own, and that architectural substance lies within the quality of its spatial contribution or in its spatial invitation. Architecture is not just an anticipatory situation, waiting to be occupied, but participatory (even when the space is physically not in use) through its capacity to communicate.

For a course to generate an architectural discussion both students and teachers must understand the creative task facing them, and especially at the start of the course remain receptive to deviation in approach. The task can be addressed from many different levels, social political, cultural, and philosophical in order to broaden the general concept of the task and in finding ways to inspire methods of problem solving. At the same time, we are rather strict in requiring what ever they bring to their discussion is directed towards a 3 dimensional discussion.

Why do we teach what we teach?

In order to have or give energy to an architectural discourse, one must first develop a common base understood by the entire class, and in some way one must accept this base as the start-

ing point for deliberation. From the beginning our discussions are spatial discussions, but other subjects can be brought to this exchange and the definition of "spatial" can be tested. Our goal is to put pressure upon and examine expected concepts in architecture, and hopefully anticipate future changes.

In a time where the architectural discourse is rather open, and it is difficult to find a single common direction, it is essential to go back and review core concepts and attempt a somewhat deeper understanding of a given problem, not as a researcher, not for the sake of the argument itself, but rather to come into a position to begin a 3-dimensional investigation and to accept architecture's limitations.

Architectural pedagogy is undergoing major adjustments, as is the profession. In a sense teaching has abandoned a number of postulates and pedagogical methods that were effective and little challenged during the last century. Many teachers were educated and began their practices before these changes really took hold. This probably contributes to some of the confusion and uncertainty over what should be retained from earlier methods. I have a strong belief in the capacity of young people to adjust to the demands of the information society. Crammed with facts and information from many levels, they must learn how to apply and sort out this information strategically, and they understand the consequences of their chosen strategy. It is essential that the total learning process in architecture keep this change in mind when choosing a pedagogical approach. To be complacent with the status quo in design pedagogy and to allow information's "authority" to filter into this pedagogy unquestioned is a challenge.

How do we teach in the design course?

I find the studio-based environment both challenging and interesting. It is an environment that seems to give the best results for the student and in keeping the teacher directly engaged with student concerns. A studio that functions well (where energy can be sensed) is a great place to be and a continuous challenge. My studio class is usually between 30-40 students. Almost everything takes place in the studio. All our lectures are given here, as well as outside lecturers on history, theory, structure that relate to the semester project. Other academic requirements during the semester are minimal thus the student is almost totally submerged in the activities connected to the studio. In many ways this situation is a one-to-one relationship between teachers and students, a process, a continuous conversation. The entire class attends critiques three times a semester. This helps to create a forum where students can inspire one another, and forms an awareness of being part of a class. It is a type of teaching that takes a lot of energy. It is time consuming, and requires concentration in order to have a constructive interest in each individual student, but it is also very rewarding.

The computer has forced some adjustments. Obviously the atmosphere changes when each student sits (earphones and all) tied to a computer. Now, when most drawings are computer drawn and only the "result" will reach the public domain of the table, the timing exercised by the teacher towards the student in relation to when to interfere or when to make conversation requires a strong pedagogical awareness.

Why do we choose to teach in this way?

The reason for the studio teaching and the individual approach and guidance in relation to each student is that each has to strive towards an architectural voice of their own. I am not talking about personal "style", but a voice. Not at all, students should work towards an architectural standpoint, a voice from which they can direct a dialogue towards a client, colleague, and others. Without an inner confidence, the student will meet the professional world lacking the necessary tools to understand and avoid dead end situations. To a certain degree, the continuous discussion in the studio prepares the student for the major inundation of opinions, offers, pressure, and the insecurity he or she will face once the formal education is finished. The student must have an architectural voice and develop a creative method to draw the best from a given situation

or problem. I have found no other way or place better than the studio to develop a student's individual method. This is always a pedagogical challenge, since it is individual. The personal architectural voice and method are not separate, but interact. There is a strong relationship between the chosen method/process and the result, and the studio situation is best equipped to analyze and help the student improve his or her method.

What are the exercises and design themes?

As mentioned earlier, to find the proper task becomes a creative act in itself. The programs we offer always call for an architectural search or an architectural argument. Even the title will hint at an area of importance. The program is precise, but at the same time the contour of the result is open. Often students write their own program in relation to a given text, thus they also have to clarify their position to the program text. An architectural program should avoid becoming just a physical answer to a given set of postulates, but rather become a challenge in itself. The student must not use the program and its content as an architectural excuse (the program instructs and therefore limits the student to a given answer), but rather he or she should be responsible for the program.

Why do we suggest these exercises?

The challenge is in some way to direct an architectural discussion towards the future. We must go beyond the idea of problem solving and the completion of a set program, and rather question the questions, the definitions, and functions in architecture. In order for this architectural conversation to occur, the program has to have an architectural argument, a common ground, and at the same time the conversation needs to be inclusive, open. In order to keep this openness, the architectural argument and work in place, concentration, engagement and communication from both the students and the teachers is essential. We work together as a team. This is a challenge, but it offers great results, and is truly an inspiration to experience the studio so full of energy.

How satisfied are we with the design course we teach?

It has been important for me to build up a teaching team. This gives great pleasure, but I am never really satisfied with any of the results, yet I experience joy and satisfaction throughout the semester and also on the final critiques. I can clearly see that young people develop and discover their potential, not only in understanding of their creative process, but as human beings. To be part of this is the gift teaching gives back to you, and it is also this that gives the energy to go on.

Teaching has no clear finished product, no limitations, but at the same time it requires a strong awareness and concentration from the teacher as an engenderer. It is not a hobby or something that you can do on the side. To be a good teacher is an exhausting profession, and it is rather a pity that so little is appreciated, respected, or looked upon as something of importance to the profession.

How could we improve the course?

We could improve the course by being even more precise in forming the architectural focus in relation to the given task. There is also need to find better methods to help keep focus and concentration throughout the semester. If the class loses momentum or focus even for a short period, it is very easy to make short-term compromises that diminish the inherent potential in the given task.

There is always room for more outside inspiration brought into the studio environment such as guest lectures and professionals outside academia.

The course could also be improved by less focus on the final result, and more attention on the result of the process. To have a strong awareness of each step or each level in the process is important for the course as a whole, and here the teacher must also develop the capacity to understand and reveal each of these levels to his or her students.

Final remark:

Teaching is an ongoing adjustment in its strive to communicate.

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