

Reading Teaching Cultures in Urban Design Education

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How could a book of this nature be read?

I would like to start saying that I have been working at becoming a better teacher since 1992 and that my teaching knowledge has accumulated on the basis of failures. Perhaps, I could describe my career as a series of failures, which has amounted to knowledge, and I am still on the road of trying to become a better teacher. This is the whole purpose, after all, of this initiative, which for me is to gain better insights into the teaching process. So, this is the personal story and underlying motive behind the initiative to organise this event and to publish the volumes on which this workshop is based. I should add that with this presentation I would like to share with you a series of thoughts that occurred to me in the process of collecting the various texts, organizing the books and presenting them.

First and foremost, I will start with an ethical question, which I consider to be very important: *how should a book of this nature be read?* Since there is not only one answer to that question, I want to present you my own view. I did not read it in an effort to side or agree / disagree with one text or another or even to find groupings I could say I communicated with and others not. So, I did not read with a judgmental attitude of good / bad, correct/wrong, or with what was compatible / incompatible with my value system. On the contrary, the way I read the book could be described through the following metaphor.

A few weeks ago, I downloaded, from the internet 20 different versions of the song called "Fly Me to the Moon" and I recorded a CD with them. There was such variety that we would enjoy listening to each version separately in its own right, its own distinct quality and particularity, without the tendency to pass judgment. With each variation, ranging from jazz to disco, blues to original sound track, etc, you knew that it was the same song, but in the end, you got a different feeling or pleasure from each. This is what I experienced when I read the book, where the texts seemed to be different versions of the same "song" expressed in totally different ways, with different values and words, just like the song whose lyrics were not always the same. So, the variations set each text apart with each representing a different world. It seems that we live in a period of time where differences count more than similarities, and the way to proceed from now on is to invent ways of dealing with this new situation not via contradiction and polemics, but with a renewed spirit of cooperation, allowing us to continue our "Babel" dialogues in order to protect them, keep them alive and give them eventually a creative perspective.

Which is the world we want to teach?

I wish now to draw your attention to the reading focus emerged by the above mentioned attitude in the process of going through the material. I want to start with a rather evident (hypo)thesis: *there is no project without an object*. Whenever we design or run a project, we have an object in mind. So, an issue that I wanted to look at in terms of the texts was: *how was the object perceived / conceived?* The second (hypo)thesis is that there is no project without a subject, so, I wondered while reading: *what is the conception of the subject in the teaching approaches of the book?* The third hypothesis is that *there is no project without trajectory*, meaning that there is always a process through which a subject looks for an object. So, I was looking for the *proposed process in the teaching approaches of the book*. The fourth hypothesis is that *there is no project without a reject* because in an effort to create a better object, the subject needs to go through a selection process which always rejects options belonging to or reflecting an already manifested or established value system. Last but not least, *there is no project, without "surjet"* (overcasting / topping) as Jean-Pierre Boutinet¹ so sharply indicates.

The focus of my reading then centered on these five parameters, which I will now discuss in more detail. As far as, **the object** is concerned, we know that **the city** as architecture always escapes its definition every time a new definition appears and a new effort to approach this object is made as part of a continual process of rejecting and redefining. What was interesting in my reading was that the city as revealed through the different texts does not, certainly, have its own circumscription, that is, perception or conception. We can find a spectrum of perceptions, starting

from that of the city as a system or structure, as well as the understanding of the city and its architecture as a social condition, whereas there are cases where the city is a cultural condition. Therefore, from the structural to the social and political versions of the object and with the dominance of its cultural dimension, there are at least four different conceptions / perceptions of the city and, implicitly, architecture that could be found in the texts.

Regarding **the subject**, since the teaching of architectural or urban design addresses those who become designers, the conception of *the designer* is relevant, and it is interesting to find that there is no common definition of what a designer is. Again, we can find different versions or approaches to the understanding of the designer. For example, the role of the *problem solver* emerges from the pages of those who talked about the design process as a problem-solving activity, demanding training in the respective skills. Another personality evolving from other texts is that of the designer as a *social regulator*, intervening in a given space and exerting social influence, thus the role, here, is not just that of the problem solver, but social intervener as well. An additional figure characterized by some is that of the *cultural interpreter* of a place, whose role is slightly different from those previously mentioned. Finally, there is little evidence, actually, only one or two cases that hint at the urban designer as a creative artist, making an artistic intervention in a space. Therefore, there is an interesting variety in the understanding of the **object**, as **city** and the **subject**, as **architect, designer** or **intervener**.

Almost all of the texts deal with a design **process** that is approached and influenced by the various perceptions previously mentioned. For example, in the description of the exercises, some texts say that students are asked to *analyze* the urban space whereas in other texts, teachers ask students to *understand* the space while others speak of feeling the space or even of reading the space, all suggesting a different approach to the way the design process is to be perceived and realized. Strangely enough, those that propose analysis are in fact, considering the city as a structure or system, thus looking to the urban designer as a problem solver. Moreover, those teachers that call for an *understanding* of urban space present the city as a social and cultural phenomenon and think of the designer as a social or cultural regulator. In contrast, those who propose "*a reading*" of the city as it appears before us, today, consider the city as a meaningful cultural artifact, reflecting or expressing a place or society, thus, the designer is seen as one who interprets these meanings.

If we move on to the aspect of rejection, what we will find is very similar to what Cesare Macchi Cassia said previously, which is that there is a kind of "**antithesis**" toward Modernism, which actually nourishes the thinking and activity of new designers, at least that is what Modernism claims to do. Modernism is often subjected to a great deal of criticism, but rarely do we hear of alternatives beyond. Critiques may be based on social and cultural premises, but the core of such criticism or rejection is really the factors related to the Movement itself.

As a final point, in connection with the "surjet", that is, the "force motrice" or driving force, the meaning that is to say the hidden motive or value behind the teaching approaches, several values surface. One particular value system that I could detect in one or two of the texts is *rationality*, which expects the students to approach a space rationally / reasonably. Another criterion used to evaluate a space and the student work in it is based on *originality*. Those whose intentions are to remain close to the social dynamics introduce students to the notion of organic adaptation and development in what already exists in the same way, more or less, but in a more contemporary version. There are others that introduce the value of *legibility*, meaning that a space should be made comprehensible or "legible" so that it is capable of being "read". Of course, there are also those that introduce students to the value of *beauty and an aesthetic code defined by them*, but such teachers are not many and mainly found in the book on Architecture.

What can someone deduce from this reading? I would say, firstly, that there are many interpretations of the teaching of urban design and that all those interpretations have an internal coherence and a unique understanding of what the city or designer is, and for this reason, they propose a particular way of carrying on a process, a particular way of feeling that and a particular way of theorizing or creating a discourse on it. Nowadays, as this is a contemporary experience, in our schools, there are many aspects coexisting on how a city should be designed, the space must be organized and the teaching must be developed. The city, like the song variations, includes

different paradigms and aspects of what the city is, what the teaching of urban design is, and what architecture is. All this might be a reflection of our "Babel" situation, which is both our weakness and power.

The question that follows, then, is what *do we teach?* I often catch myself thinking that I know the answer (or truth), and want to teach what I have in mind that I consider best; so, I go on to develop that and try to persuade my students that among all others that is the best choice. In our every day life, however, we have come to accept that there are many realities and different conceptions and considerations of these realities. Those people who feel this the most are actually our students and with them in mind I will proceed to the third part of my presentation that concerns them.

What is it that the students want to learn?

Students have a very good understanding of the speed with which things change on a daily basis and that there are many truths, so, if we stand before them with one version of the world, I doubt that we will be very convincing. I have the feeling there is a kind of gap being created, especially by those of us who have been teaching for a certain time and who have been educated in a different framework, which raises the question of how we have incorporated in our consciousness, the changes that have been taking place.

I would like to define a little the way I understand teaching and wish to start with something David Willey mentioned very cleverly about students. He said that, as teachers, we should ask ourselves how students learn what they learn and why they learn what they learn. It seems to me that there is something missing which I, personally, consider to be very significant, that is, we should ask ourselves, *what is it that the students want to learn?* Nowadays, we are not faced with passive audiences, arriving in our classrooms as a neutral body, all eager to receive information and learn from our teaching practices. Surely, they want to learn something, but what they want to learn is dictated by the social conditions peculiar to the contemporary culture. What is peculiar about this contemporary society or culture is that there are many truths, different aspects and a strong tendency for individualization, thus encouraging them towards a desire to develop their own process in design and their own understanding of the city and architecture, as well as wanting to develop their own profile of professional life. So, if the teaching is geared towards one direction and does not remain open to what Per Olaf Fjeld suggested earlier, the gap between teacher and student is inevitable.

I think that our acts as teachers turn into teaching only when the student internalizes or appropriates the content of the course and, without this internalization, no teaching takes place and, therefore, no course. What we do as teachers is merely half, the other half is the student who will create with us a new world; so, without student participation a course cannot be completed. To clarify this point, we can use the example of a book which with a reader complements itself and breathes new life; otherwise, it sits on a shelf and gathers dust. Every student, today, wants to have his/her "world", in the same way that he/she wants to have his/her own cell phone, distinct ring tone and personal computer. It seems that this spectrum of cases we have before us and complexities of individual considerations oblige us to develop different ways of understanding and incorporating student participation in course design. This is what I felt was missing in my reading of the texts, and reflecting on my own teaching experience, I sometimes think that this is the reason why our courses lack interest for our students, mainly because they do not manage to find this articulation in our teaching, as well as the fact that personally, as teacher, I may have felt that I had lost the link between this perspective and through the teaching to create another "world".

A question that naturally follows is *what could such a teaching practice be?* I am afraid I do not have the answer and my expectations lie in the hope that through these meetings we may be able to provide answers to this delicate articulation of a new "world" through the teaching process. My feeling is that we have moved on to another pedagogical era, an approach that is not content based or centered on information to be delivered. As Per Olaf Fjeld and David Willey pointed

out, teaching is not the transmitting of information, a view supported by pedagogues who claim that contemporary courses need not be organized around information or knowledge, but on competences. In order to clarify this point, I will use an example from our own experience as parents.

Those of you who have brought up children will remember that a typical mathematical problem children need to solve is to estimate how many kilograms of paint is required to paint a room once they are given the dimensions of the room and windows. So, the student will estimate the surface and go about solving the problem, knowing how many square meters a kilo of paint will cover. This is the old approach to solving a problem, with one right or wrong answer. However, we know that there are various approaches that can be used to solve this problem if we take into account individual differences. For example, someone might start off with buying two cans of paint and see how far he/she might be able to do the job, and on the basis of this calculate the rest of the paint needed. Someone else might buy a certain supply but make an agreement with the shopkeeper to return and be reimbursed for any unused paint. These alternative approaches should be equally valid and acceptable solutions to dealing with a given problem, in fact, the teacher should give students the capacity to deal with these kinds of issues, but not to necessarily indicate a solution. On the contrary, the teacher should encourage and develop individual creativity by allowing the student to invent new ways and solutions. This is where the competences come in.

The contemporary geography of design education

Last year, in the framework of our project, we started working on this issue of the competences, but mainly with respect to the kinds of competences teachers from architectural schools consider important for students to acquire. The aim of this inquiry, which is on-going, is to arrive at an updated list of competences most valued by teachers. Loughlin Kealy and I had an excellent collaboration, last year, in trying to define these competences, with the ultimate aim of providing an opportunity for teachers and schools of architecture to structure or re-structure their course design on the basis of the definitions of the competences. Hopefully we will eventually complete this task, if possible.

Finally, I will close this presentation by saying that many years ago at a meeting in Prague, organized by Jean Francois Mabardi and Marvin Malecha, entitled "Beginnings in Architecture", it seemed that the "beginnings" suggested by the title, could be plotted on a map. For example the Nordics had the tendency of introducing their students to social considerations of the environment or world, while the British introduced their students to the functional aspect of space. The French, on the other hand, introduced students to thinking about the concept of space, whereas the Italians introduced students to the esthetic value of space. The Turks and Russians introduced students to the scientific understanding of space. So, all these approaches or starting points formed an interesting "geography" of particularities. As I like differences, I looked for a similar pattern in the reading of the texts, but could not find any, and whether this is good or bad is certainly subject to discussion. Anyway, discussion is important not only for the purpose of keeping teachers alive, but to ensure that education does not become a closed issue.

Note

1. Jean Pierre Boutinet describes these 'paronymes' of the project (projet : sujet, objet, trajet, rejet, surjet) as structural methodological parameters of the design activity. J.P. Boutinet, *Psychologie des Conduites du Projet*, Que sais-je, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1993, pp.84-90.

