

# Education Practices

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“Rather than ask. “What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time ?” I should like to ask, “What is its position in them?”

- *Walter Benjamin* The Author as Producer

The title of this text, taken from Walter Benjamin, proposes that it is more useful to focus on structural change within the discipline of architecture in order to change its contents than to consider the contents alone. The contents of architecture, in order to survive, needs to reproduce themselves. The production and dissemination of architecture is an exercise of power - the time and space allocated to its technologies of persuasion is not innocent but full of vested interests. The reproduction of the discipline of architecture takes place through many structures, of which the most influential ones for architects are practice and education. Whilst practice stands as the most powerful sphere of passing on of architectural knowledge, education too is a vital site of the reproduction of architectural values. Education and practice form part of the relations of production of architecture. Yet their attitudes towards the relations of architectural production try to conceal the position of each one within them.

In both education and practice many values are overt, but many more are covert. None is more covert than the actual dependence of practice on the supposed autonomy of the academy. The architecture school is not readily considered as a site of practice; its apparent autonomy is essential to uphold the authority of architectural-activity-after-education as the *real* work of architecture.

The relative autonomy of education is an inheritance of a cultural and economic order dependent on the division of intellectual and physical labour. The split between theory (or rehearsal) and practice (or the real world) goes back to the sixteenth century division of the master-mason into the architect and the craftsman. At that point in time the architect lost his role as producer of buildings and instead increasingly became a scholar and designer, whose newly reproducible drawings and writings could be used by others to build buildings. The foundation of the academies, where the new architecture of representation was taught, was a consequence

of the need of architecture to deal with a new plethora of signification, whilst surveyors and craftsmen dealt with the production of buildings governed by economic and physical constraints. The academic commitment to sign production (design) and its ideology (ethics and aesthetics) has led to a number of dilemmas for the architect.

Firstly, within practice, it has distanced the architect from the building site and its concerns from the contractor, the engineer, the craftsman, the quantity surveyor and the project manager. Clinging onto the distinguishing characteristic of design, the discipline and profession has sought to limit the apparently invasive intentions of the surveyor and contractor. This protective attitude has done little to maintain the architect's status - in the UK, as in the United States, the architect is responsible for only about 20% of building commissions.

Internally, design and ethics have also been carefully policed. A second separation - of architectural design of buildings from architectural imagery and text within publication, film, product design and art - means that the latter are not considered to be legitimate architectural practices. Representations of architecture surround us and form the public consciousness through advertising, the cinema, magazines, art installations and exhibitions yet most of the representations in these key areas are not the work of architects. They are dismissed in certain circles as ‘unreal’ because they do not result in physical building.

In more conservative architectural schools the student, already separated from the practice of construction, is therefore also warned away from the practices of architectural drawing and text which actually form the central concern of the academy. The core activity of the school thus has no outlet beyond its confines. Yet students in a school of architecture do not produce buildings, they produce drawings, models and texts. These are denied their own form of practice. This argument is not new, and is relatively clear and self-evident. Students rehearse the design and construction of buildings on paper or through models; they have no physical building site. This is a frequent criticism of education by practitioners.

Yet the practising architect also hardly ever produces a building. Architects in traditional practice, like students in schools, only 'rehearse' the building through the drawing. The autonomy of education is thus falsely and ideologically used to oppose and so affirm the 'reality' of practice; together education and practice affirm the reality of 'building' by opposing it to the imaginary realm of 'representation'. These false oppositions are political - they attempt to heighten the social status of building design, which only qualified architects should enter. Thus they try protect it from unauthorised appropriation by the unqualified, without success in most countries.

The limit to legitimate practice posed by the above exclusions is belied by actual experience of many architects. Particularly as a result of the current recession, entry into related territories ranging from project management to film set design often forms a crucial means of maintaining income and attracting a new client body. In practice, architectural offices are constructing new models that respond to the pressures of post-Fordist economic 'flexibility'. Financial advisors recommend a 'broad' portfolio of work. Yet in the academy such models seem to be attractive only as 'theory', as 'independent research'. And similarly in practice, when such ventures into related territory begin to imply an expanded definition of professional activity, the ranks of professional bodies also appear to close, claiming protection of the architect's title. Defensiveness, rather than expansionism, characterises the architectural mind-set in the recessionary nineties.

Thus, despite a diversification of activity in the profession and a lively theoretical debate in architecture schools a number of tacit agreements about the autonomy of architecture remain. Rather than expanding the definition of architectural practice and questioning the divide between education and practice, traditional protective definitions of both areas resurface again and again. Aimed at reestablishing 'unity', these only assert old, divisive exclusivities, limit the opportunities which confront the architect and are riven by contradictions. The number of actual contradictions which are glossed over in architecture are numerous, rather than being developed positively into non-confrontational structures of difference, they continue to mark the battle positions within education and the profession.

Firstly, education itself is divided. Many architecture schools are currently based on principles of competition, preventing collaboration between teachers within and across schools. This worship of the 'free market' is unnecessary and unwise; it ultimately disempowers the architect, dividing and so marginalising the discipline. Careful boundaries are drawn between group identities; cross-pollination and long term collaboration is out of the question. This desocialisation of the architect perpetuates the myth of detachment underpinning professionalism and allows ideology to penetrate and disempower by transforming structural inequality into mere personality; the political becomes the personal in the most debilitating manner.

Secondly there appears to be an enormous distance between education and practice. Student projects are forgotten upon the move to architectural practice. Neither students, teachers or practitioners appears to be seriously bridging this gap. This problem cannot be laid at the door of the academy alone; practitioners, whilst being dissatisfied with the status quo, fail to redress the problem either in their own offices or by teaching and so changing the architecture school. And many students, whilst commendably seeing architectural education as an opportunity to re-examine the world they have inherited, have little desire to return the knowledge gained to the realm of practice. It is so much easier to theorise than to act.

Thirdly, new forms of architectural practice which do not fit the historically established activities of the architect are marginalised by the lack of a vision for the future of the architecture. Practices and theories located beyond the edge of the professional model of architecture are consequently not acknowledged as lying within legitimate architectural territory. This is as visible in the curricula of many architecture schools as it is in the membership of the profession. The concept of a profession relies on the exclusive possession and reproduction of a body of knowledge which is, by necessity, constantly changing; yet the protective edges currently exclude practices in related disciplines which once were a part of the architects task.

Finally our isolation has led to a negative public conception of architecture inherently based on the absence of common languages. Communication is a two way process; if architectural values held by the majority of the population are obtained from magazines, video and television, architects should act within those territories to make their practices more accessible to those that are currently excluded. If the gap between education and practice is already too great, then the distance between architects and their public is even greater. Architectural education could achieve a great deal by focusing its energies on this divide, yet it seldom does so.

Architecture schools passively reproduce a double autonomy; the internal one of the discipline and the external one of cultural divisions based on professional exclusivity. There are few models for communication across academic and vocational disciplines, even less engagement with popular culture and, in the UK at least, almost no involvement with structures of industrial production. Students teachers and architects fail to prepare strategies for new areas of practice and do not consider the architectural school as the site of such practices.

The protectionism which is a fulcrum of the system of division of labour has excluded not only members of the construction and component manufacturing industries but also members of other creative disciplines related to architecture such as contracting, engineering, project management, landscape, interior design, product design, film and theatre set design, architectural journalism and architectural history as well as the looming 'space' of virtual reality from legitimate entry to the profession. Yet the concept of the

professional is under attack around the globe and nostalgic reentrenchment is not proving to stem this tide. The task of the architecture school should therefore be to welcome in all of these areas of architecture and direct them towards action.

Schools of architecture should use their knowledge to reformulate the nature of architectural practice. The school should consider itself as a site of practices of architecture. A school's practices could thus construct and reconstruct an active model for the profession. Such practices could cover a broad level of activity and collaborate with existing expertise where possible. The description that follows identifies a number of education practices possible at a single architecture school; it is, however, important to point out that this is not a prescriptive or exhaustive list, nor is it necessarily set down on order of importance. Different schools could practise in different ways.

### 1. BUILDING PRACTICE

Firstly, the School could design and build. Using existing knowledge within their faculties, it could seek research funding to establish itself and business development funding to continue. The range and technologies of this practice would depend on the interests of its tutor/architects. Ideally there would be more than one building practice. Such practices could be full-time or part-time, depending on the specificity of the practice and its members. A greater integration of building and education could be realised in a more open attitude to employment patterns of part-time students, and a reconstruction of part-time courses could take this into account. Precedents exist for such activity both in this country and abroad - the building projects of Gropius's and Meyer's phases of the Bauhaus forming the clearest precedent to date, and initiatives such as Florian Beigel's at the University of North London or the Welsh School forming more recent models.

### 2. PUBLISHING PRACTICE

Secondly the School could publish, aiming to reach a wide audience via journals and publishing houses. Publication reaches across nations and disciplines. The school can expand access to publication for students, tutors, the local community as well as international contributors and so reconstruct not only the content but also the form of publication to make architecture more accessible. The range of textual investigations could be greatly broadened beyond the academic dissertation to include related areas such as legal text, specification, marketing, brief writing, storytelling and so on. Many schools, particularly in the USA, already publish; these efforts are laudable but reach only a specialised audience, leaving the autonomy of education largely intact.

### 3. INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE

The school could collaborate with more overseas schools by expanding, amongst others, exchange programmes of stu-

dents, staff and work placements. Post-colonial studies have yet to feed into architectural practices in the first world; architecture schools should take a lead in this area. One of the first steps in decolonisation is the school's hiring policy. This is already being responded to in many schools but the Anglo-Saxon still seldom learns a second or third language. International practice could make this an automatic requirement

### 4. COMPONENT PRACTICE

This would consist of prototype research and production practice for architectural components. This practice would be closely linked to the workshop facilities of schools and could use CAD as well as other media relevant to manufacturing. This practice could also form the centre of knowledge about materials, structure and construction; wherever possible this knowledge should be acquired by experience as well as by abstract learning. Standard products are a fact of life for the practising architect, yet the study and transformation of these currently has little place in the academy or office; similarly, the designers of such components currently seldom have an architectural training. Yet within architecture schools at present there is a profusion of artefact production. This, however, remains within the realm of the one-off art object, which, however undeniably exquisite, is fated to remain a private adornment.

### 5. SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICE

The school could also extend the examination of the global/local context of the production of material resources - the subject of ecology. Whilst this an already strong area of research in many schools, the research is largely empirical and so excludes the complex ethical, economical and social issues inherent in the subject. A simplistic morality, itself full of contradictions, underpins many current strategies and often leads to a denial of aesthetic and political differences within the field.. There is very little critical debate in this area that has not already been appropriated by the multinational corporations to maintain ecological and political iniquities. This practice could begin by looking at the use of material resources within the school itself.

### 6. EDUCATION PRACTICE

The teachers in the school could acknowledge their own expertise and pass it on to students. Education is a practice. Tutors have skills in teaching which are useful in any situation where knowledge about architecture has to be transmitted. This practice could encourage its students to teach in other parts of the school, in the secondary school system and in related disciplines. The elaboration and legitimisation of such a practice would allow knowledge of architecture to reach many more audiences.

### 7. DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

The architecture school could acquire and develop land by

collaborating with departments of surveying and estate management where knowledge of these processes already exists and is taught. However, this knowledge should be used as creatively as possible within the restrictions placed by financial and legal structures. Most importantly, processes that allow greater participation in the economic base and political strategies of development should become the centre of its activities. This practice is pointless if it only replicates the iniquities of speculative development.

## 8. FILM PRACTICE

The creation of illusory space by combining stage technology with celluloid technology and now computer animation and virtual reality technology forms another neglected field of architectural production, which currently lies outside the legitimacy of architectural practice. The technology and economy of film of film production is similar to architecture; the speed of production is perhaps taster, but the organisational structures like subcontracting and finance procurement are very close. We now have far more architecture programmes on television; again these help to make architecture more familiar to the majority of the population Yet are not recognised as architectural activity within the academy.

## 9. GENDER PRACTICE

Recently, investigations of gender in disciplines close to architecture as well as within architecture itself have led to new kinds of practices crossing disciplinary lines. In particular, authors whose gender or sexuality has not fitted easily into the professional stereotype have, out of necessity, invented other roles, broadening the definition of legitimate architectural activity. Gender stereotypes form a fundamental part of the relations of production within architecture; structural change in this area profoundly changes the position of the sexual underclasses and affirms new forms as well as new contents in architecture. Investigations of this rich territory are now beginning to make their mark within academia but have not yet fed into everyday practice

## 10. RACE PRACTICE

A practice of pressing importance within architecture is that which acknowledges races and ethnicities. As with gender, this subject now has academic credibility but outside the academy structural change has been far harder to achieve.

Other potential practices include facilities management,

interior design, building economics or building construction itself as well as a multiplicity of types of community architecture can . These can all be practised within the academy. Such practices could simultaneously act as research bases and sites of action. At undergraduate level they could form educational routes that ultimately lead outside traditional architectural practice. This would give us a more architecturally informed general public; intakes into degree courses within this structure could therefore expand greatly. At postgraduate level those 'education Practices' could offer Master's degree level education and practical experience at the same time - Part 11 and Part III merged. They could accept a far wider range of experience than is currently the norm; contractors, component designers and manufacturers, interior and landscape designers, film set designers, architectural researchers, and so on should all form bona fide employers. I know of no single school which has put such a broad programme into practice. Again, the only limit on intake here would be external constraints posed by government funding, the financial viability of each practice, the commitment of individual schools to particular practice programmes and the willingness of the profession, in its accrediting and validating role to welcome competition and innovation in the field.

A criticism of the above proposals is that it continues the separation of the disciplines along old and familiar partisan lines, even if the demarcations now divide a broader, more interdisciplinary territory . Further practices, which work with the fluidity of disciplinary boundaries, could arise from a re-examination of these new divisions. The relative autonomy of education means that the school has many freedoms which conventional practice has not. These could, and should be put into practice.

There is little we can do to reunite our vast knowledge base in a world where the invention (and policing) of new knowledge is the biggest growth industry. The myth of the architect as Renaissance Man, integrating a defined field of knowledge, is long over. Yet the formal educational system still relies on this old model. A society which believes the value of difference should welcome diversity within an expanded definition of architectural activity. The coming together of education and practice reactivates both territories. Education can critically reconstruct practice; it can be a critical practice. It is time for alliances and collaboration inside, across and outside the discipline of architecture. And, most importantly, it is time for action.