PEDAGOGY, TRANSFORMING SCHEMES

Man Overboard:
No Rest from the Institutional Studio Culture

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This paper is intended to motivate conversation. It is intentionally written to be polemical, theoretical, and provocative. I do not make ascertains to truth or science, just to debate.

One year ago during the ACSA conference in Baltimore, the American Institute of Architecture Students' (AIAS) Studio Culture Task Force sponsored a Town Hall Meeting to address the health, safety and welfare of architecture students. Their meeting and the founding of a task force was propelled, in part, by separate car accidents that had taken the lives of architecture students whose driving was impaired because they were sleep deprived. Apparently these tragedies occurred immediately after the students had "pulled all-nighters" in studio.

While no one would argue against the immediate import of student welfare, there are issues other than the individual at stake as we seriously reconsider studio culture at the center of architectural education. With the following paper, I investigate "Studio Culture" from a sociological or collective perspective. Asking the question, what are the consequences of the *hidden curriculum* (or latent values) on architecture's accountability in the social realm; I essentially deconstruct studio culture to expose what I believe is glaring civic irresponsibility.[1]

Unfortunately, at last year's Town Hall Meeting, too often the conversation slipped into the unproductive theme of teaching students "time management skills." Blaming the victims of a culture predicated upon time immersion, is misguided at best and at worst, displaces the essential discussion that must occur if architecture, the institution, will develop a more effective voice on behalf of architecture in service to the public.

This paper has three parts: (1) the first part describes the studio culture; (2) the second analyzes this culture from a sociological perspective; and (3) the final section describes the social and political consequences of maintaining the status quo in architecture education.

DESCRIBING WHAT WE ALL KNOW: DESIGN STUDIO CULTURE

With its attendant charette-modeled pedagogy, The Design Studio is a tradition that has fluctuated little and is implemented without much variation across the U.S.[2] The Design Studio persists, notwithstanding paradigmatic turns in architecture. It persists regardless of fluctuations - in the economy, the zeitgeist, digital technology, social values, cultural attitudes, or mass retirement by faculty. The Design Studio endures without registering a new millennium, increasingly diverse student bodies (in some regions,) or even, God help us, hijacking terrorists.

We know what aspect of the culture an AIAS Studio Culture Task Force is assembled to analyze. It is the feature that bewilders outsiders when they first learn how students forego sleep for days on end to labor nightly in often poorly maintained campus buildings. It is part of what *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* Peter Monaghan documents in, "The' Insane Little Bubble of Nonreality' That Is Life for Architecture Students."[3] The bubble of nonreality refers globally to the current state of architectural education. Specifically, the title is describing architecture studios full of activity in the middle of the night, while the campus or city is asleep. That we design t-shirts announcing to the initiated, "architects do it all night," is informative of a culture whose foundation rests upon, well, very little rest.

Almost all of us who completed architecture programs have colorful stories about all-nighters in studio. How we never saw our family or friends or went to football games or parties, how we didn't have time to study for exams or participate in community service, or to vote. After four or five undergraduate or two or three graduate school years, we were insulated, out of touch, and eventually, the only people we knew were other architecture students. There was another world, somewhere, out there and all we knew was that they got to sleep and that we didn't. Often the stories are told with a sense of humor, but the subtext is one of physical, emotional and intellectual deprivation.

AN INSTITUTION BY ANY OTHER NAME: THE SOCIOLOGY OF STUDIO CULTURE

How has what amounts to ritualized hazing, this socially unsuitable and individually detrimental culture turned out to be normative for

architecture? The Design Studio is by definition a social institution - an established order comprising rule bound and standardized behavior patterns. Inertia helps explain the continuation of most social institutions.[4] While some sociologists maintain that dysfunctional institutions will gradually transform over time, others theorize that institutions persevere because they benefit dominant groups.[5] Since this task force is established, some may speculate that it signifies the beginning of a measured modification in studio culture. Perhaps so. A task force notwithstanding, this long-suffering resignation to an arguably dysfunctional studio culture begs the question, who is advantaged by Design Studio culture?

The short answer is – employers. What they get upon graduation is a compliant workforce who has internalized several deluding notions. For instance that: (1) it takes well over 30 years to become a reputable (read: star) architect, so do not expect respect any time soon; (2) true architecture is practiced for its intrinsic value, a living wage/salary is immaterial; (3) prestige is to be conferred only upon designers and "design" is very narrowly defined; (4) it is acceptable to problematize esoteric issues of design, not the culture/role of the profession; and (5) in a climate of scarce and competitive resources where there is only room for a few good architects, it is customary to criticize all other architects' work. In addition to those characteristics, the new graduates are accustomed to over-time. In fact, given "free time" many architects report being unsure how to spend it.[6]

Of course, suggesting that it is because the employer benefits that the culture remains unchanged, is a rather simplistic response. Adding that the administrators of leading architecture schools are often renowned architects who could benefit by such accommodating employees, gives the source of this studio culture an all too conspiratorial feel. The studio tradition is much more complex than that. But I offer that the ones who have the immediate power to make changes in pedagogy, the Directors, Chairs, or Heads of the elite institutions have not done so. And why should they? They made it through architecture school and look how well they turned out - subsequent generations can do the same.

INSTITUTIONAL INERTIA

How does the institution that is the architecture design studio produce students in such lock-step acceptance of those values, attitudes and beliefs? Sociologists identify architecture school as a Total Institution - any social organization in which the members are required to live out their lives in isolation from wider society. Military boot camp is an example of a total institution. Even if these studios are but semesters long in duration, the characteristic that finds social action confined to a single location is classic total institution. In such organizations there is no possibility of completely avoiding the administrative rules or values that prevail. If students do not accept this culture, they can change majors. Most architecture departments call this "attrition."

Research on total institutions has traditionally concentrated on the social psychological consequences that can arise from this form of life. Sociologist, Irving Goffman noted that various "mortifications of the self" (e.g. verbally abusive public critiques) occur resulting in a reconstruction of the person to fit with the demands of the organization, to an extent that could never be achieved in more open social contexts.[7] Total institutions are designed to resocialize and change people and their sense of themselves. Every total institution is a mini-society for its participants and they share certain characteristics, such as restriction of personal freedom and a limited choice of work. Similar to the military whose goal is ensuring that soldiers follow orders via the chain of command, architecture school demands a denial of the self in the name of architectural design. Like soldiers, architects are discouraged from questioning the hierarchy, the assignments, or authority.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF DESIGN STUDIO CULTURE

Civic Disengagement

But unlike the military, one may surmise that society would benefit if architects were less uniformly indoctrinated. If we educated more critical thinkers who could synthesize diverse bodies of knowledge we may stand a chance of having architects involved at more levels of societal decision-making. Including an architectural perspective at all levels of the political process would be an invaluable contribution. I believe that the built environment needs better advocates and that architects are not educated in a way that allows us to be effective promoters of our discipline or effective communicators outside of professional circles.

With a pedagogical emphasis on engagement in studios making objects that are perfectly crafted, where time spent on this activity is part of how we operationalize success, no matter how motivated or brilliant an individual student is, he or she simply cannot garner a full college education that will facilitate effective civic participation. For example, right now architecture students don't even have time to understand the issues, let alone go to the polls to vote.

Further, and perhaps most notably, with all the time spent designing, crafting, and working independent of people and knowledge bases external to architecture, we do not have the expertise necessary to make our architecture the powerful cultural artifacts that they could and ultimately should be. As built culture, architecture translates, embodies, and conveys values. Yet, because the culture of the studio prizes form over content, making over meaning, time laboring above time reflecting, imagining independent of reading, and com-

petition among us over cooperation between disciplines – our work becomes essentially irrelevant to a society that demands real solutions to a myriad of social problems that architects cannot even begin to understand, let alone help solve. As one student put is so bluntly in my seminar course, "we are just playing with ourselves."

Homogenous Profession

Another latent function of this studio culture is a homogenous professional workforce. Even if we could attract people to the study of architecture who have a foot in the real world via personal experiences or who have the intellectual depth and curiosity to approach architecture from new disciplinary foundations – we don't have the pedagogical flexibility to support different ways of knowing or being in the world. There are many and complex reasons why people of color and many women do not persist in architecture. But I think that we would all agree that if architects were more representative of the general population – diverse in their racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds – that our design and building would be more responsive to distinct provisions for constructing meaning and identity, affecting the experience of place, and creating shared understandings and memories. In short, architecture could better connect to a more diverse range of clientele and communities.[8]

A rigid studio culture that negates such realities as family obligations, part-time jobs to pay for schooling, or other course-work and classes, all but ensures a homogenous workforce. Who among us can achieve in this studio culture? Those from more privileged social class backgrounds or from ethnic groups/classes with loose social ties and few family obligations have a chance. Students whose background value systems do not recognize such a singular and narrow purpose as a legitimate aspiration would not persist in architecture. The Design Studio has, essentially, an approved culture that delegitimizes other ways of committing to the world. As it stands, studio demands conformity, uniform work habits, and respect for status superiors. That is not a one-size-fits-all culture.

Built-in Inequality

In *Building Community: A new Future for Architecture Education and Practice* Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang observe that the studio experience is not an equitable one.[9]

The authors/researchers cite design juries where some students are celebrated, while others are humiliated, as places in architecture's curriculum where egotism is fostered. In researching their text, they observed an arbitrary apportionment of outright cruelty directed toward some students. In what they described as a "Kafka-esque" drama, sleep deprived students would "defend" their work in one-way communication with faculty.

No one has specifically studied the harm that befalls students who receive such negative responses to their work in architecture. But sociologists have looked at length at the latent functions of choosing to advantage a select few in a scholastic environment.[10] What attitudes are instilled in the students who routinely receive high praise and how do they operate in architecture? This advantaging socialization experience prepares select students for assuming positions of power in the their profession. It is achieved through the curriculum, which builds on and extends the cultural capital of upper status individuals; the pedagogy which emphasizes competition; the role models provided by the teachers themselves who are most often white, male, heterosexuals; and above all, formal and informal rituals that reinforce a sense of superiority. These elements compose what the researchers call a "moral education" through which students develop high levels of self-esteem and confidence, and learn to justify their positions of power.

The demographic composition of the profession is not changing as quickly as other profession in the United States. When we ask about issues of multi-cultural diversity, our first questions must begin with what we are teaching through the hidden curriculum in architecture. Privileging in public a select few discourages many students who have potential to make great contributions in architecture while it simultaneously gives others the ammunition to justify their privilege.

While some may argue that educating architects in this manner instills discipline, others may ask at what cost? I suggest that rewarding students who appear the most dedicated to architecture – those that spend the most time in studio and produce the most work, is socially irresponsible. Ask any architecture student when was the last time that she or he read the newspaper. I can almost guarantee that the most prestigious student in the studio - the one that can draw (either by hand or machine,) manipulate form, and build models the best, will pay the least attention to politics, the economy, or general civic responsibility. The cultural values of the design studio do not reward students for knowing about complex social problems. It rewards students who produce the largest quantities and manipulate form in the most interesting ways, regardless of content.

At the end of the semester, when all of the student design studio work is pinned-up for critique, I have had faculty tell me that my students' projects, "look good." That I, as their instructor, am being evaluated by student *presentations* is problem enough. But the more significant message is that the *content* of student work, or the meaning behind design decisions, which cannot be garnered in moments of glancing over slick presentations, is irrelevant. Students know this too. More often than not, better grades are given to the best illustrator, not the most comprehensive thinker.

DEFINING A PROFESSION

For granting self-regulation, social prestige, and autonomy to a profession, society expects professionals to place its interests (rather than the profession's interests) first. How can we expect our graduates to design responsibly for a society of which they are not part? Pedagogically, by isolating a homogenous group of students in studio, we are guaranteeing that architects are irrelevant to society. At this point in history our work as educators of architects is self-indulgent. There are real problems that need to be addressed in architecture Does a moral imperative – service to the public realm – underscore an architects practice and what does that entail? By maintaining a studio culture that expects students to be self-sacrificing, competitive, and insulated from others, we are reifying an occupation that will watch as more knowledgeable professions frame answers to the toughest questions facing humankind. And the loss will be society's, as architecture, the voice of design, won't be heard.

There is an exercise used in introductory social science courses that conjures a scenario where a new society has to be created on an island. The boat racing toward that island has room for only so many passengers and students are instructed to keep those individuals who will be of maximum benefit for beginning a new society. Because we are training architects to be self-involved followers-of-authority, I believe that the architect would be the first one thrown over board.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

[1]Hidden curriculum refers to the unannounced message that a student learns such as ethnocentrism and respect for authority. In US schools, students may also learn lessons in competitiveness and a belief in the superiority of nonmanual labor. Many critics charge that these latent functions are actually the heart of schooling. Learning to know one's place, to obey superiors, to believe that the system is fair, are lessons that last a lifetime. Thus, the educational system is a channel of social placement, gatekeeper to the occupational system, sorting student into "winners: and "losers" at an early stage of their education. See for example:

Apple, Michael. *Teachers and Texts: A Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education.* New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

[2]Dana Cuff reports ("Studio Crit" *Architecture*, Sept. 2000, p. 77) that "new" studio-types are rapidly evolving. Research-based studios, certain digital studios and shortened star-studded sprint studios are replacing the traditional studio. However, the fundamental "culture" of the architecture studio remains unchallenged.

[3]Monaghan, Peter. "The 'Insane Little Bubble of Nonreality' that is Life for Architecture Students," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 29, 2001, p. A34.

[4]Merton, Robert K. *Social Theory and Social Structure.* New York: Free Press, 1957.

[5]For structural theory see the classic: Parsons, Talcott. *The Social System.* New York: Free Press. 1951. For conflict theory see the classic: Marx, Karl. *Capital,* Volumes 1-3, London: Lawrence and Wishart (1951).

[6]Corroto, Carla. *Constructing Architects: A Critical Ethnography.* Doctoral Dissertation, The Ohio State University. 1996.

[7]Goffman, Irving. *Asylums.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday. 1961.

[8]Ahrentzen, Sherry and Janetta McCoy (eds.) *"Doing Diversity:" A Compendium of Architectural Courses Addressing Diversity Issues in Architecture,* Washington DC: The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture. 1996.

[9]Boyer, Ernest and Mitgang Lee. *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice.* Princeton NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. 1996