The Global Reach of American Architectural Education: A Case for the "Urban Spatial Turn"[1]

ROBERT COWHERD
Rhode Island School of Design

INTRODUCTION: THE DIFFERENCE THAT "DIFFERENCE" MAKES

The increasingly global nature of architectural practice has been paralleled by a growing presence of foreign students in our schools of architecture. These foreign students are more and more likely to have grown up in the rapidly growing cities of the developing world, most notably in the Asia Pacific region. This new population of architecture students brings with them a different set of life experiences and concerns than their classmates from North America. Specifically, students from the cities of the developing world are far more likely to be motivated by the search for ways to address social, environmental and cultural issues through architecture – not unlike the directions being urged by American students, contemporary issues, and, not least, accreditation committees. Access to the new population of foreign students and curriculum development that responds to their needs might just be one of the best ways to enrich and inject a new relevance to the education of American architects.

This paper examines the shifting demographics of American architecture programs and its implications for bringing certain key issues more effectively into the classroom. The first of two directions specifically examined in the paper is that of the expansion of programs dealing with architecture and urbanism – beyond the architectural object to architecture as fabric, as social engine, and as a force for change. The second is the uneasy relationship between American architectural education and the growing global export of American development models – what is American culture and what unpredicted meanings accrue to American architectural forms transplanted to foreign soils? Finally the paper turns to illustrations of how international students working on an international studio might offer an extended range of tools for architects to reclaim a more

significant role in addressing problems of the twenty-first century.

THE SHIFT EAST AND SOUTH

America attracts more students from abroad than any other country in the world. Almost 600,000 international students study in American universities every year comprising about 10 percent of the graduate school population.[2] A great many of these are here to study in American schools of architecture. Every year, approximately one out of every four graduate degrees of architecture are awarded to students visiting from overseas.[3] While many factors play a role in attracting foreign students to certain schools, there is a tendency for the more selective American graduate programs to have a higher percentage of foreign students. At the best schools, the international student population can be from about one third to one half of the enrolled architecture students. Not reflected in these numbers is the fact that among the American students in architecture schools are included students who are now American residents but were born overseas. This number can be quite large as the United States receives more immigrants every year than every other country in the world combined.[4] At the University of California, Berkeley, where only 19 percent of the M.Arch. candidates are categorized as "international," two out of three students were born on foreign soil.

For most of the twentieth century, the term "foreign student" referred primarily to students from our counterparts in the developed world, primarily the British Commonwealth nations and Western Europe. Increasingly, foreign students in American schools of Architecture are not from Europe but from Asia; and not from the developed North but the developing South. At the Rhode Island School of Design, one third of the students are now categorized as "international students." Of these, 55

percent are from Asia and an astounding 81 percent are from the developing world.[5] Nearly one fifth are from Korea alone. Another disproportionately represented group are those from Hong Kong. whether directly from the newest province of China or via post-1997 homes in the U.S. or Canada.

Not only do students from Asia and the developing world constitute a significant proportion of our student population, but also their numbers are predicted to increase significantly in the years and decades to come. only slightly delayed by the security responses to the events of 11 September 2001. This is partly due to simple demographics. The two categories "Asia" and "developing world" each on their own account for a majority of the human race: three out of four people on our planet live in Asia. and, to the extent that the "developing world" remains a useful distinction. it accounts for a vast majority of humanity.[6] With the birth rate of "developed nations" dropping below the replacement rate, there will be fewer candidates from Europe and North America for seats in our schools. Along with rising economic prospects in Asia and the developing world. the historic shift in student demographics is expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

1. URBAN CHALLENGES

This ongoing shift in the student population has far reaching implications for architectural education in America. The new ecology of broader life experiences and viewpoints of this more diverse student population brings with it new possibilities and new demands for exploring a set of issues that most schools of architecture are still poorly positioned to take on. First. the increasing numbers of students from Asia and the developing world are more likely than their American classmates to bring to our lecture halls and design studios a need to understand how architecture might be deployed to resolve the challenges of life in cities. This is again. in part due to changing global demographics. The good news for the planet's carrying capacity is that birth rates in developing countries are *also* dropping towards replacement rate. The bad news is that even with the slowing population growth worldwide, the population boom that began with the industrializing West will continue for another half-century driven mainly by huge increases in China, India and Latin America. In this period. the global population is expected to increase by *half* – from just over 6 billion at present to close to 9 billion by 2050.[7] What is even more startling is that between now and the year 2025. virtually all of the 1.5 billion additional global *urban* population will be added to the cities of the developing world.[8] Unlike the rapid urbanization of nineteenth century Western Europe and North America, these growing cities are not able to fund their city building projects and basic infrastructure with the spoils of a global colonialism or monopoly control of new production technologies. On top of a lack of resources. the challenges faced by the cities of the developing world are of an entirely different scale. It took New

York 150 years to add eight million to its population. while cities like Mexico City and Sao Paolo each grew by about that many people in only the last 15 years.[9] As a result. the students arriving at the portals of American architecture schools from the cities of the developing world bring with them a set of concerns that have emerged from the conditions of housing shortages. inadequate infrastructures. environmental degradation. and dramatic disparities in life chances between the elite and the vast majority of the population. As such. students from the developing world tend to have an intuitive grasp of the complex social forces of the city based on their life experiences. They are more likely to understand the city as the product of intertwined political. economic, social and cultural forces in ways that their American-born classmates may have only recently begun to grasp. if at all.

This heightened sense of urgency represents an important opportunity for North American architecture programs. In the United States, the concerns of environmental degradation. sprawl, and social justice remain minor considerations relative to the all-consuming attention paid to new technologies, theory, and the aesthetic aspects of form-making. Even with the limited influence of the Congress for New Urbanism and smart growth movements within American architectural pedagogy. the urgency of these challenges elsewhere makes the related "crises" faced by North Americans seem relatively tame. By comparison, American-born architecture students are more likely to remain largely focused on the "form-giving" aspects of architecture with less attention devoted to the larger framework of urbanism required to address the concerns described above. In contrast, extensive life experiences with the environmental, social, economic. and cultural challenges of rapidly expanding cities of the developing world arm the new foreign student population with a set of burning questions and problems crying out for some kind of resolution. For advanced degree architecture students from the developing world. their striking forms are more likely to be employed towards the resolution of pressing social, cultural, or environmental problems. Design proposals are less likely to be self-contained objects and more likely to be engaged in the urban fabric in which it is placed. The new foreign students are more likely to be interested in the growing number of programs that bring architecture together with "urbanism." At MIT, dual degree candidates working towards advanced degrees in both architecture and planning are disproportionately from the developing world. In responding to the needs of students from the developing world, instructors are simultaneously helping students to place the social and environmental issues of America into an invaluable perspective.

2. CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSLATION: AMERICAN MODELS OVERSEAS

There is a second significant opportunity found in the different perspectives brought to our halls and studios by students from

the developing world. To the extent that these students are engaged in explorations of form. it is more likely to be tied up in significant ways with the larger issues of identity construction more likely to be hotly debated in their societies of origin. This is properly the topic of the panel session next door. However. it is important to address it here inasmuch as one of the most common strategies of identity construction in the developing world involves reference to Western architectural forms. More recently this process. formerly obsessed with issues of the postcolonial city. has been displaced by a deference to national economic policies that have subordinated the process of identity construction to what is euphemistically referred to as "market forces." It is this process of identity construction through the means of late twentieth century capitalism that has yielded the most significant impacts on the architecture and urbanism of cities throughout world in the past 30 years. The invocation of market forces has gone hand in hand with the adoption of American development models. The most vivid result has been the transformation of skylines throughout Asia and the developing world into replicas of Houston. Less easily captured in a single image. metropolitan regions have been restructured in an outward expansion of the city into the formerly agricultural exurban edge. Imported typologies of gated community, shopping mall, office park. golf community, and the freeway interconnecting them are now common aspects of the Asian landscape. The vast areas of land transformed by these development models have been mistakenly taken to represent the widespread emergence of a new middle class in these nations. Instead they commonly serve only the super-rich elite constituting the wealthiest two to five percent of the population.[10]

The post World War Two generation was embroiled in the quest for an architecture that offered a distinct national identity that demonstrated the distinctions between modernization and Westernization. In the new environment of economic globalization. it is far more common to simply acquiesce to the imagery of new technologies and global capital. In the case of Indonesia, internationally sponsored efforts to address the urban challenges of its largest and fastest growing cities were weakened and displaced by the adoption of market-based approaches that did little more than enrich the political and business elite.[11] During the 1980s and 1990s. the rail-based Jakarta development masterplan. developed with significant international input. was gradually replaced by a Build-Operate-Transfer private sector toll road construction program that hastened the very automobile dependency that the earlier effort was designed to head off. This experience has been repeated to varying degrees from Turkey to Shanghai. The formerly separable projects of identity construction and environmental sustainability have. in this way. been brought together under the operation of market capitalism and political expedience. Much of the popular literature on "globalization" suffers from too shallow an examination of these phenomena. Within architectural education. Rem Koolhaas' *Project on the City* has been

heralded as a new direction in architectural research but falls short of the kind of critical examination this topic deserves. Such efforts offer a sense of fascination in place of critical analysis. They grant an aura of inevitability to developments that made possible only by a carefully engineered alignment of political and business interests within a cultural climate that unreservedly celebrates rising consumption. For a majority of citizens of the developing world. the negative consequences of this consumer class urbanism have become the harsh reality of daily life. The quest for a viable response to this reality forms the motivating basis of architectural education for students that grew up exposed to its conditions. It is this background that positions the young professionals of Asia and the developing world in a privileged position from which to creatively and constructively challenges these models. Ultimately it is this particular positionality that presents the greatest opportunities for North American schools of architecture. The growing number of students grounded in the conditions of the rapidly urbanizing cities of the developing world. presents a student constituency for engaging in studio explorations that address issues of urbanism and culture head on.

THE URBAN SPATIAL TURN AT HOME

The greatest beneficiaries of any shift in focus resulting from a more international presence in the studio are likely to be the American-born students who might otherwise not be exposed to issues of urbanism and culture. In the mid-1990s, a year-long symposium at Harvard University charged a broad spectrum of contributors to examine the perception that architecture. as a discipline and a profession. had reached a new low in its cultural relevance and capacity for leadership. The common thread of several of the contributors (including nearly all of the non-architects) was that architecture in America has lost its "public purpose" displaced by self-serving interests of egotistical "artiste" architects or those of their greedy clients.[12] Sociologist Magali Sarfatti Larson observed that architects have strategically withdrawn into the position of an autonomous artist in the hope that the strength of their image creation might empower them in competition with the patron's control of money and the building industry's control of the material means of construction.[13] The recent media attention lavished on the works of Frank Gehry and several contributors to the Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Competition have brought a new prestige to architecture. But the focus of this welcome notoriety neglects the urbanism of these proposals even as it rushes to celebrate their flamboyant form as the new icons of our age. One fears that. as in the postwar period. American architecture will fail from so much success – success for all of the wrong reasons. The urban trophy projects threaten to serve as the exceptions that prove the rule: that good architecture is a luxury reserved for only the choice locations. the exceptional programs, and most well-heeled clients. In the meantime for the non-celebrity architect. the narrowed scope of the "artiste"

culture of architecture is predicted to only further encourage the budget cuts of value engineering, the loss of control over details "managed" by the building trades, and a loss of credibility to advocate for public interests.

The larger argument of this paper is that architectural education would do well to expand its scope of endeavor to include issues of urbanism and culture more centrally in its pedagogies. And further, that such a shift in emphasis would resonate with a more widespread trend effecting the fields of planning, the social sciences and American society itself. In the 1970s, sociologist of the city, David Harvey, predicted a shift in the social sciences away from aspatial generalizations to examinations of spatially specific phenomena more akin to what geographers were producing at the time.[14] At a meeting of the Associated Collegiate Schools of Planning last November, I referred to Harvey's prediction and pointed to the growing number of degree programs in urban design, the sudden surge in spatial planning faculty positions in schools of planning, and a warming up of architecture programs to urbanism as signs of what I called an "urban spatial turn." I attributed the "urban spatial turn" in planning (and architecture) to a convergence of four trends:

1. The rise of concern over the environment and the realization that both the causes and solutions to environmental problems are inherently spatial in nature:

2. The availability of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) as a tool for visualizing and examining spatial phenomena:

3. The increasing geographic specificity of the social sciences foreseen by Harvey: and not least significantly

4. The increasingly international nature of commercial, cultural, and educational exchange.

This is to point out that the growing presence of international students in American Schools of architecture is but one component of what might possibly represent a larger shift in which architects would do well to play a leading role. In so doing, we would be rejoining a time-honored tradition of architecture's participation in political processes.

While there is a long tradition in America of individual architects offering social critique, as a group, architects have earned a reputation since the 1980s as the lapdogs of vested interests and thus an unlikely source of political leadership. But this has changed as a significant minority of American architects has stepped forward as individuals and in organized movements into the larger debates of politics and community through the issues of the environment, smart growth, and New Urbanism. While this represents a re-engagement of architects with society after a long hiatus, the architecture cultures of some parts of the world never abandoned the larger discussion of the city and society. Many of these come with a mandate from their government or university sponsors back home to

seek out an education relevant to some of the most serious challenges that will face them when they return home. Every year, the government of Singapore sends the best and the brightest of their young professionals from the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the Housing Development Board to Harvard and MIT for graduate study. Indonesia's architecture schools have been challenged to fill their lecture halls with faculty members with advanced degrees from the West backed by government scholarships to help to meet the challenge. Similar programs have been launched in China, Korea, Taiwan and elsewhere. The expectations of these governmental and academic sponsors are two-fold: first, that their graduates from American schools of architecture will boost the quality and prestige of their programs: and second, that they will return better able to address the troubling problems of the twenty-first century. Even without official sanction, students from Asia and the developing world are more likely to bring with them a personal motivation to understand and address the particular demands placed on them by the challenges of their home cities and regions. These are the young men and women most likely to play significant leadership roles in bringing the special skills, insights and perspectives of an American architectural education to bear on the formidable struggles of their societies.

Some of these efforts have paid off in significant ways. In Indonesia, the most vocal group on issues relating to issues of environmental sustainability and social justice are almost all architects, many of whom received advanced degrees in Australia, Europe, and the United States. In 2002, the leader of this group of architects, with a Masters degree from Belgium, mounted a serious campaign for Governor of Jakarta in the first democratic election for that post. In aspiring to this position he was consciously following the example of architect, Jaime Lerner, who, as mayor of Curitiba, transformed that city into the most renown model of a sustainable city in the world. Lerner subsequently became the governor of the province and is now the president of the International Union of Architects (UIA). Not far away, the architect Enrique Penalosa became mayor or Bogata, Columbia and successfully launched a public transportation system that aspires to capture 80 percent of all trips by the year 2015.[15] Since resigning from office, Penalosa has dedicated himself to assisting other cities throughout the world to adapt key aspects of his urban sustainability model. While the small number of architects with effective political careers may be comparable to the small number who achieves superstardom, the vast majority of architects arguably have more to offer our world as engaged citizens than disengaged artistes. Exposure to foreign students and foreign contexts offers students of North American architecture programs a means and a motivation for becoming engaged.

THE BALI STUDIO:
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AN INTERNATIONAL STUDIO

Figures omitted for size.

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Robert Cowherd is an architect, urban designer and planner practicing in Cambridge, Mass. His most recent teaching was at RISD and his most recent publication is "Orange County, Java: Hybridity, Social Dualism and an Imagined West" (co-authored with Eric Heikkila), Southern California and the World, E. Heikkila and R. Pizarro, eds. (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 195-220. He has a PhD from MIT and his dissertation was titled: "Cultural Construction of Jakarta: Design, Planning and Development in the Late Suharto Period, 1980-1998."

NOTES

[1] Paper submitted for presentation to the session: "Urban/Suburban Geography, Demography, and Design" at "Recalibrating Centers and Margins: The Associated Collegiate Schools of Architecture Annual Meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, 14-17 March, 2003.

[2] This number is rising even after the events of 11 September 2001. "The USA Study Guide," http://www.usastudyguide.com/whytheusa.htm (2002).

[3] Data on international students enrolled in American architecture programs was derived from data compiled by David Sokol, John Czarnecki, and Christina Rogers, and published in "Architecture Education Survey," announced in *Architectural Record*. (August 2002), <www.architecturalrecord.com/features/EducationChart_AL.asp>

[4] Ben J. Wattenberg, "It Will Be a Smaller World After All," *New York Times* (8 March 2003).

[5] Information on the Rhode Island School of Design Department of Architecture comes from 2001/2002 National Architectural Accreditation Board Statistical Report, with thanks to Diane Walker of the RISD Registrar's Office.

[6] "The Global Urban Indicators Database 1996: A Summary Analysis," *State of the World's Cities 1999* (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements), (accessed 23 January 2001), <http://www.urbanobservatory.org>.

[7] Ben J. Wattenberg, "It Will Be a Smaller World After All," *New York Times* (8 March 2003).

[8] Dinesh Mehta, "Urbanization of Poverty," *Habitat Debate* (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements) 6, no. 4 (2000), <www.unchs.org/unchs/english/hdv6n4/home4.htm>.

[9] Mattei Dogan and John C. Kasarda, "How Giant Cities Will Multiply and Grow," introduction The Metropolis Era, Volume 1: A World of Giant Cities, eds. Mattei Dogan and John D. Kasarda (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1988), 12-29.

[10] Solvay Gerke, "Global Lifestyles under Local Conditions: The New Indonesian Middle Class," chapter 6 in Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities, ed. Chua Beng-Huat (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[11] Robert Cowherd and Eric Heikkila, "Orange County, Java: Hybridity, Social Dualism and an Imagined West," chapter 9 in Southern California and the World, eds. Eric Heikkila and Rafael Pizarro (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002).

[12] William S. Saunders, ed., *Reflections on Architectural Practices in the Nineties* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

[13] "Patronage and Power" in *Reflections on Architectural Practices in the Nineties*, William S. Saunders, ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

[14] David Harvey, Social Justice and the City (Cambridge, Mass.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988 (1973)) 22-29.

[15] Enrique Peñalosa, "Urban Transport and Urban Development: A Different Model," University of California's Center for Latin American Studies (8 April 2002).