

Awakening consciousness: observing great practice

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“Everybody really knows that education goes on all the time, everywhere, all through our lives, and that it is a process of waking up to life. It takes a heap of resolve to keep from going to sleep in the middle of the show. It’s not that we want to sleep our lives away. It’s that it requires certain kinds of energy, certain capacities for taking the world into our consciousness, certain real powers of body and soul to be a match for reality. That’s why knowledge and consciousness are two quite different things. Knowledge is like a product we consume and store. All we need are good closets. By consciousness I mean a state of being “awake” to the world throughout our organism. This kind of consciousness requires not closets, but an organism attuned to the finest perceptions and responses. It allows experience to breathe through it as light enters and changes a room. When knowledge is transformed into consciousness and into will, ah then we are on the high road indeed.”

– M.C. Richards, *Centering: In Pottery, Poetry and the Person* 1962.

ABSTRACT

A great practitioner is conscious to the world—awake to the core of their being. They have transformed their knowledge into capacity for perceiving our world and offering life-giving responses. In architecture education, little focus is placed on fostering consciousness in its broadest sense; on developing powers of observation or on intuition. As students transition into practice, many lack the insight to think deeply about their profession and ask significant questions: What is it to be conscious in the profession of architecture? What are the meaningful contributions I wish to make to the lives of other people, to our collective world? What enables a practice to transcend the norm, making lasting contributions, point to the future, and wake the light in all us? The Great Practice seminar assists students in answering these complex questions, and offers the opportunity to grapple with consciousness, both

personally and professionally through an in depth exploration of exemplary practice. My intention is to provide each student and future architect with a meaningful model for achieving personal and professional excellence.

Great Practice is an elective seminar within the School of Architecture open to any advanced student enrolled within the university. Recently I have presented two seminars, “Great Practice: The Office of Charles and Ray Eames” (spring 2000), and “Great Practice: Tadao Ando & Associates” (fall 2001), both comprised of a catalytic mix of inquisitive undergraduate and graduate students in addition to several professional interns.

EDUCATIONAL GOALS

“Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the Masters . . . seek what they sought.”

Zen teaching, 8th century.

Fostering personal consciousness

As a foundation for this seminar, the first educational goal is to expand and enrich the understanding of personal consciousness. This is achieved by fostering self awareness and an understanding of what it is to be fully engaged in the world with ones mental, physical, emotional and spiritual aspects in balance. This is supported by discussions on ways of perceiving, knowing, and developing a trajectory of life and work marked by significant acts of self-renewal and transformation.

Developing professional consciousness

The second goal of the seminar is the development of professional consciousness. Through the examination of one great practice and the individuals who make up that practice,

the students begin to make the connection that all truly great practitioners are conscious individuals first; that they embrace this aspect of their lives to the point that it spills unconsciously into professional life and daily work. Several important questions are considered: Who are these people? What forces have shaped them? What are their core beliefs and values? How do they continue to inform and shape their life, work, and the discipline of architecture? What is the essence of their contribution to our world and how does it reframe our understanding of self?

Translation and application

The final educational goal requires that each student translate and apply their understanding of consciousness in "practice." Each student is asked to take their expanded sense of self and formulate an aspect of "practice" that reflects their newly forming ideas about professional consciousness, then implement and test its reality through three collaborative material investigations with assistance from local manufacturers, fabricators and artisans.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

"We work because it's a chain reaction, each subject leads to the next."

Charles Eames *Elliot Norton Lectures in Poetry*
#5, Harvard University, March 29, 1971.

Fostering personal consciousness: a forum for personalized observation, growth and reflection

To enrich and expand the personal consciousness of each student, an environment of heightened respect and trust must be created to insure open and honest communication. In this environment, personal histories, perceptions, belief systems and values are shared more easily and with openness. This forum is carefully nurtured from the beginning by a number of activities which include: the sharing of personal histories concurrently with that of the great practitioner's own life; the discussion of readings on human consciousness; and the discussion of how one feels and is moved by the direct experience of the great practice's buildings, office, collaborators, exhibitions, etc. No matter what aspect of the great practice is under observation, there is always an emphasis placed upon its connections to each student's own life and future practice.

Developing professional consciousness: readings, lectures, case studies and site visits

To develop each student's professional consciousness, one great practice is investigated in depth in the seminar. The introduction of these individuals, their lives, philosophy, way of practice, collaborations, and resultant work are accomplished through discussions of their writings, supplemented by faculty lectures and additional critical readings. Each student is responsible for examining one pivotal work by the great practice in a comprehensive case study, requiring that they research, analyze and present the selected work to the seminar. As these chronological case study presentations unfold week after week, the students begin to make the connection that exemplary professional consciousness grows out of highly conscious individuals (architects, clients, staff, builders, etc) engaged fully in life. Through example, they come to understand how these practitioners evolve, seek deeper self-awareness, connect to humanity and translate this understanding into their work. One of the most powerfully confirming experiences is the required field trip to visit the great practice's work first hand. In the Ando seminar, we traveled to St. Louis to explore the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, met with Emily Pulitzer (client), Bill Wischmeyer (Ando's associate architect) and visited the "*Tadao Ando*" retrospective exhibition. In the Eames seminar, we went to Los Angeles and visited the Eames House, met with Eames Demetrios (Eames grandson) and members of the original office. In addition, we visited "*Mathematica*" and "*Work of Charles and Ray Eames*" retrospective exhibitions. It was remarkable to observe how these great practices came to life and became personal, as each student experienced the buildings and spoke with people who had been directly involved in their evolution.

Translation and application: developing an aspect of "practice"

One of the most important aspects of any learning experience is the opportunity to translate newly acquired knowledge and insight into one's own life and work. As Charles Eames said, "*Of most importance is the learning from your own primary experiences.*" That idea became the focus of the translation and application segment of the seminar. Each student was asked to take their expanded sense of self and formulate an aspect of "practice" that reflects their newly forming ideas about professional consciousness, then implement and test its reality, through three collaborative material investigations. The students are asked to select one material and explore its inherent nature in three ways. First, in the *off-the-shelf investigation*, they are asked to celebrate the nature of the material with no physical alteration using only the power of their multi-sensory awareness. Second, in the *hand tool investigation*, the students are asked to explore the nature of the material using only hand tools and hand techniques. Finally, in the *power tool investiga-*

tion, the students are asked to express the nature of material using only power tools and machine techniques. As work progresses throughout the semester, the students find themselves seeking counsel and collaborative opportunities with local manufacturers, fabricators and artisans, thus an underestimated aspect of practice has been revealed. In many cases, these material investigations challenge and extend the normative working methods that most students have been exposed to thus far during their summer internships or prior work experience.

Work in any great practice is intense and pricelessly rewarding. The projects undertaken are mentally and physically absorbing, challenging and demanding for everyone involved. Such is the case in the great practice seminar. Once under way, the student's level of excitement and motivation to explore the potential connections was contagious and fueled the overall level of inquiry and discussion. Throughout the semester, each student was consulted and evaluated on personal growth, quality of intellectual inquiry, as well as the quality of the work produced.

EVALUATION METHODS

"I don't believe in this 'gifted few' concept, just in people doing things they are really interested in doing."

Charles Eames *Elliot Norton Lectures in Poetry*
#5, Harvard University, March 29, 1971.