

## SFA WJRC May 2020...on teaching architecture...

### Ideas on Architecture and Architectural Ideas.

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*"To make a plan is to determine and fix ideas.*

*It is to have had ideas.*

*It is so to order these ideas that they become intelligible, capable of execution and communicable. It is essential therefore to exhibit a precise intention, and to have had ideas in order to be able to furnish oneself with an intention. A plan is to some extent a summary like an analytical contents table. In a form so condensed that it seems as clear as crystal and like a geometrical figure, it contains an enormous quantity of ideas and the impulse of an intention."*

Le Corbusier, *Vers un architecture*, 1923

'The Illusion of Plans'

No two people can agree today about how best to educate architects. Matters are not helped by the perpetual imposition of short term ideological agendas upon educational institutions which should be thinking in the long term. Worse still is the tendency to imprison architectural education in some questionable definitions of university 'research' whereby the cult of the 'PhD' is presumed to confer intellectual seriousness and credibility on a mode of investigation which does not fit easily into institutional and educational norms (often in the belief that this will boost international academic ratings and state funding). Architectural education is a domain with its own requirements and skills. Desperately needed is a re-foundation which recognises that the transmission and reception of architectural knowledge do not fit into educational conventions based upon numeracy and literacy alone. Designing buildings, objects, urban spaces and landscapes, requires an integrated approach combining visual and spatial thinking, the mastery of techniques of construction, an ability to interpret social needs and aspirations, a sense of architectural history, an intuitive sense of form, the acquisition of problem solving tools, an understanding of materials and craft, a grasp of climate and

natural forces, in short a solid architectural culture and sense of design principles. The student needs to learn to synthesise often contrasting realities in projects capable of being translated into finished buildings in real space and time.

The current confusion is compounded by a lack of clarity about the central aims of the architecture itself, especially at a time when the media are saturated with transient images and superficial iconic buildings serving the interests of the marketing world of international real estate capitalism. In this scenario the architect himself or herself is portrayed as a 'star', a narcissistic persona, supposedly guaranteeing financial gain for the developer and a position in the hall of fame for the designer. To put it mildly, there is a crisis of values concerning the central roles that architecture might play in enhancing the quality of social life and private existence in the contemporary world at all levels of society. There are also no firm conventions concerning the appearance that buildings should take. We are not in the position of the Ecole des Beaux Arts or even of the Bauhaus, both institutions which taught clear methods and conventions for analysing problems and translating ideas into architectural spaces and forms. Architecture schools today stumble around in an arbitrary jumble of opinions which pose as dogmas, and dogmas which pose as opinions (referred to in politically correct jargon as 'discourses'). Not enough is done to distinguish between transient fashions and long term values and principles. A phrase of T.E. Lawrence's epic work *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926) comes to mind when evoking the current disarray of the field of architectural education: 'A desert whose fringes are strewn with broken faiths'.

Of course the student of architecture must be attentive to contemporary problems and to the current state of the art, but at the same time must maintain a sense critical discernment and historical perspective. Nothing is more provincial than an exclusive obsession with the present. 'Commodity, firmness and delight' - 'utilitas, firmitas, venustas' - the ancient triad of Vitruvius - has to be reinvented in every generation. The strongest of new forms have firm foundations in the past. A sense of tradition is essential and knowledge of the diverse seminal works of modern architecture is fundamental. An architectural language is learned through the experience, analysis and transformation of precedents, not by copying but by absorption and metamorphosis. Above all the student has to acquire the ability to think in architectural terms, to project concepts via spaces, materials, and sequences; to portray intentions and generating ideas by means of drawings, models or other means of representation. In this endeavour numerous lessons may be

learned from visual and conceptual art, from photography and film, from objects and spaces of all kinds, but these inspirations still have to be translated into architectural terms. At the core is a search for meaning in the interpretation of programme and site. For architecture involves the symbolic interpretation of both human and natural spheres.

One may draw a distinction between ideas on architecture and architectural ideas. A lot of the student's time is taken up with the former in ancillary subjects such as structures, sociology, theory and history – or at least history the way that it is too often taught as a minority subject remote from the design studio. Architectural ideas, on the other hand, concern the very essence of the conception of projects and should stand at the centre of any architectural curriculum worthy of the name. They have to do with imagination, spatial thinking and the capacity to visualize, materialize and realize architectural intuitions and images. The development and enrichment of such 'architectural thinking' is probably the hardest and most challenging aspect of architectural education because there are no fixed methods and much relies upon the skill of the teacher in encouraging the right balance of inspiration, discipline and intellectual rigour. Equally, much also relies upon the student's ability and motivation to define his or her own realms of engagement and investigation. Each individual will develop his or her passionate sources of inspiration.

Obviously there is a place for diverse kinds of research in an architectural curriculum but only if this is really cutting edge and of top quality. One needs to avoid the production of more and more 'grey texts' which count for diplomas but add nothing significant to the field of architectural knowledge. There is even the danger of a form of protectionism where research pushes practice into the background. Equally there may be the opposite danger of an unreflective cult of practice exercising its charisma over students without sufficient theoretical or critical reflexion. Architecture schools tend to resemble schizophrenic families in which violent dogmatism is disguised behind smiles, and it is the things which are never discussed which have the most impact on conduct. Rarely are prejudices and systems of belief exposed to the light of day. What a strange experience it is to visit the same school at decade long intervals, especially to inspect the end-of-year exhibitions which are scarcely disguised promotional exercises. Years ago it was neo-rationalist or post-modernist clichés copying precooked historical precedents. Then there was a period of 'folds' invoking so called 'French theory' in a totally arbitrary fashion. These days you are more likely to encounter tables strewn with

contorted geometrical exercises generated on computers and defended with the obscurantism of 'parametricism' or bogus science. Or again, one may encounter a very safe world of neo-modernist clichés, virtually an academy of prescribed moves and architectural formulae.

These are caricatures of course but they are too close to the truth.

Architectural schools are only too often the victims of intellectual fashions and undeclared dogmas. Then there are the cults of charismatic 'star' personalities who behave like witch doctors or snake-oil salesmen pushing their potions and instant remedies. How refreshing it is to find students who break out of the mould, or whose talent shows through even the politically correct uniform. But all this still raises several obvious questions: why the pervasive lack of rationality, social relevance and common sense? Why the lack of integration of structural and historical knowledge? Why the recourse to trendy images at the expense of substance? Why the brain washing and resort to jargon? Why the mimicking of post-modern thinkers remote from architecture, instead of the construction of theories pertinent to architectural ideas and practice? Why the lack of historical perspective on the transience of the contemporary scene? Why the failure to see that architecture as a discipline relies in part on unfolding traditions, both modern and ancient? Needed is a more sound educational model capable of integrating theory and practice, invention and technique, the contemporary and the historical.

There are different stages to architectural education of course. At the beginning it is remedial education since even the brightest students have to unlearn bad habits and learn fresh ways of perceiving things visually. Once the architecture student has grasped some of the basics, the design of projects should form the central axis of the curriculum, aided and abetted of course by adjacent disciplines such as structures, theory or the history of architecture. But these should not be in a parallel universe: the most skilled teachers of structures succeed in building direct bridges between engineering calculations, structural types and the design of actual buildings. This is where case studies of individual works can be valuable in presenting an integrated vision of design fusing the formal, functional and symbolic aspects of architecture. Similarly 'theory' should open up basic questions that have always pertained to the history of architecture, such as notions of form, function, meaning, expression, type and style. There is no place for arcane jargon in all this: theory should elucidate rather than obscure or mislead. Above all it should help the student to observe and think about the what, why and how of things: the *raison d'être* behind appearances and forms, whether man made or natural. Some of the

greatest architectural ideas have been inspired by studying the shape of boats or the geometries of nature. To see is to think; to think is to see. To draw in a penetrating way is to do both.

There are no short cuts to architectural knowledge but surely one of the best ways to learn what architecture might be is to experience, absorb, analyse, abstract and transform existing buildings of high quality in several periods of the history of architecture, modern and ancient. This presupposes the ability to see, and to capture the dynamic experience of buildings and their sites in drawings, sketches, models, mental maps or some other medium which concentrates perception and reflection. Drawings and sketches in several modes are essential in 'capturing' the life and aura of a scheme. They can distil experience and hint at underlying structures of thought and visions of the world. The student needs to master several modes from the representational to the abstract and to capture essentials in a few succinct lines and spaces on paper. These schematisations enter memory and re-emerge in a transformed state later in life. Rather than being a marginal option, the history of architecture should be at the dead centre of any architectural programme for if it is taught properly it is one of the instruments for acquiring basic architectural knowledge and penetrating to the level of generating architectural ideas. Lectures, facts, books and analyses there have to be but these should be accompanied by intensive visits to works of architecture themselves in real not virtual space. The deep reading of buildings is an art in itself. The invention of new forms is inspired and enriched by the understanding and transformation of past ones but at a level far beyond the outer trappings of style.

This in itself constitutes a form of research but one pitched in the direction of architectural ideas rather than ideas around architecture. Students have to learn to see, to analyse, to reflect upon the fundamentals of architecture by examining historical examples in depth. They have to penetrate the anatomy of intentions, the guiding hierarchy of ideas, probing the unique and the universal. For example, I have often accompanied students to Le Corbusier's monastery of La Tourette (1955) where the students spend hours sketching and where they may spend a day or two living the architecture directly. They record impressions and analyse the relation of the building to the setting. They register the changes of light, shade and mood throughout the day. They weigh up the material and immaterial qualities of the work. They internalise their personal experience. They grasp the underlying order in parts and whole, plan and section, relations and details. They enter the magical spaces of the building and sense its dynamic relationship to landscape and horizon. They

register the sequence of spaces and the unfolding views as they move from one position to another. Through on-site lectures and discussions the students learn about Le Corbusier's vocabulary, his notions of concrete, his interpretation of monasticism, and his transformations of the past. At the same time each individual student pursues his or her dialogue with a profound work at a level that is beyond words. For great architecture communicates in silence. One could just as well use a similar method to penetrate the central architectural ideas of the Pantheon in Rome, Wright's Robie House, the Taj Mahal or the Sainte Chapelle. Experiences like these, which touch upon timeless values, are among the real foundations of architectural knowledge.

**END**

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