The wrong ethics: what teaching architecture is actually for

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I'm going to start with the assertion that many people who join the teaching staff of an architecture school don't spend enough time thinking about what the school is actually for. It's not a subject that crops up in the framework of most academic institutions, beyond of course the bottom-line requirement that we meet the basic standards that our professional validating institutions demand. Those standards are, in my opinion, perfectly reasonable ones and they are scarcely controversial; they add up to the requirement that anyone who has spent several years in an architecture school should be expected to know about conventional building methods or construction managements systems, about overall legal frameworks and responsibilities, and about history and context, and to be able to read and write about these things fluently, literately, and reasonably intelligently. So this is not about the professionalisation of the practice of architecture; it's about the professionalisation of architectural teaching.

My problem with the increasing streamlining of architectural education to suit common university methods of management and assessment is that these latter are not only devised in ignorance of how architecture teaching works – they are actually inimical to the way it is done, and in the end will cause some damage to it. These things are completely different now to what they were ten years ago when this conference first convened – I've been teaching since 1993 – and the theme I want to discuss here is how new modern streamlined methods of academic management have introduced an ethical problem into the teaching of architecture. My claim is that these methods are based on literary or technical models, a common denominator derived from traditions in science and humanities teaching, and that they are prejudicial to encouraging the development of good designers.

As it happens I can give you a very specific example that I heard about for the first time last week. Some universities have now decided that the final examination board in every one of its departments should be held anonymously – that is, that those present including the chief examiner and the visiting external examiners, should not know the names of the students whose results they are looking at, presumably to avoid a subjective massaging of figures to get individuals higher or lower grades at the last minute. There's a lot to be said about this process which I won't go into now, but what struck me as absurd was a new procedure regarding borderline cases. In the past you could look at people on 49 or 59 per cent, and let them go on

up to a 2.I or a 2.II if you saw a continuous process of improvement in their design work. But because you are not allowed to know whose marks you are looking at, the subjective massaging of this kind has been replaced by complicated technical guidelines, fixed by the majority English, history, and languages schools on the committees that determine these things. It's these, and not the professional decisions of teachers that determine what situations allow a student to go up or down. These guidelines treat all the components of a degree course exactly the same, because for, say, historians they *are* all exactly the same. To cut a long story short, a borderline candidate with good and improving design abilities can't necessarily be allowed to go up if, say, they handed in an essay late at some critical moment. And that's obviously daft, because the reason why people go to architecture schools is be designers, and the reason why people teach in architecture schools is because they want to teach designers.

I haven't surveyed student management systems in British universities as a whole but I can see a pattern emerging. Using an intranet system to fix timetables, for example, has an interestingly deleterious effect on how students interact with teachers. Systems now allow a student to be categorised very precisely as a member of a tutorial or seminar group; they can find out what room they're in at the last minute, from a computer system that allocates rooms precisely according to the number of people and rooms available at a given time, or be emailed by a teacher in a message which pinpoints a selected group. Administrators love these systems because they are 'efficient', in the sense that individuals are handled with precision; and academic managers like them because they reduce the amount of time required by teachers to organise things. It's my observation that these methods can cut the individual student off from the sense of being part of a taught group. There's no overall timetable or overall room plan; a tutor doesn't necessarily know where everyone is at a certain time. I'd go as far as saying that these systems are non-visual, because you can't just look at a chart and see where one group is on one day in relation to another, or where one teacher is when a student wants to meet them after a class of their own. The information is increasingly broken up into small accurate, definable pieces that form no overall picture, as with the example of the anonymous exam boards.

This I think will be familiar to you in one way or another. Let me try to explain why I think this is part of a series of larger problems or threats. We all know that everything has to be defined positivistically wherever money is concerned. You can't just say that you are going to research early neo-Georgian bank branches for the hell of it, because the paymaster wants to know what they are getting for their money. You can't just say you are taking a group of students to Berlin

for the weekend, because you have to work out the travel and the insurance and accommodation problems and you have to have a health and safety plan to cover every possible slip off the pavement. None of this is new. But look at some of the ways in which modern ideas of positivistic, inclusive management are affecting architecture students. One example is the dyslexic student. Lots of design students are dyslexic. In our department we have proportionately and therefore I think numerically overall more dyslexic students than any other in the university. Universities have devised very sophisticated methods for tracking and supporting dyslexic students through their university careers, as indeed they should. And whilst the type of dyslexia I am talking about affects writing and some other logical skills, it doesn't affect design ability one bit. So in my opinion when it comes to the design project, the main meat of the programme, dyslexic students should not be made to feel that they are at a disadvantage to start with by any official classification or special conditions such as being given more time to do things. They should be left to get on with it. If good designers who are dyslexic find it hard to write, they should in my opinion simply not have to write much. And yet the universities' reaction is to devise ever more complicated ways of compensating for what is eternally classified as a disadvantageous situation.

So the basic problem in university architecture schools is that most people who ultimately control them – politicians and civil servants, as much as academic managers – don't understand that design is design, and not an essay done with coloured pencils. This was the problem that was first highlighted from the situation that arose from the RAE in 2001, when high-performing university architecture schools were rated comparatively lowly. I only want to mention now the problems of research and research funding in architecture schools in so far as they affect undergraduate design teaching. And of course they do, because research takes people away from teaching, and a low rate of success in research funding affects the overall budget of a department. Regarding the first, I would have thought that the best people to be *teachers* in an architecture school are people who are primarily *teachers* – neither professional researchers, nor the practitioners, however accomplished, who teach design part time. If someone wants to be a teacher, and is good at it, they should be teaching. And as for the second point, about the impact of research funding on a teaching budget overall, I'm not sure that the penny has quite dropped about how much of a threat the current situation is for those who work in the field of architectural history and theory alongside design teachers.

The situation for us and its dangers were described very well by Professor Judi Loach of Cardiff University and Dr Zeynep Kezer of Newcastle University for the Society of Architectural

Historians of Great Britain at the beginning of this year.[1] I am aware of the fact that this has changed a bit since, with, thankfully, less emphasis on metrics, but it is still true that the kind of homogenous interdisciplinary cross-European standardisation that the positivists prefer poses a threat to normal common sense, let alone undergraduate teaching. To give you an example of the implications of the absurdity of the metrics idea, you need only consider that only certain types of footnote are picked up. These people want everything in the 'Harvard' way, don't they? So you could, I suppose, have had a situation in which the undergraduate teaching budget was, in practice, adversely affected because the researchers in the same department weren't writing their footnotes in the approved international way. I hope I am not the only person who thinks that this too is somewhere beyond daft.

There is in fact a link between this kind of bureaucratic professionalisation and the teaching of design and as I understand it, it's a peculiarly British one. Britain has a much richer world than most countries of amateur amenity societies – of which the Society of Architectural Historians, the Victorian Society, and the Georgian Group, or any one of many, many small local interest groups are examples. In Britain architectural history grew out of these societies and first-rate architectural writing was and still is published in amateur or enthusiasts' magazines. What that means is that people whose professional work is in another field – who are, for example, practising architects and designers – can join in this researching and writing alongside everyone else. The reason why we have for example the *Pevsner Architectural Guides* – more thorough, more interesting, more accurate and more accessible than any comparable guides in Europe – is because everyone can read them. There isn't a positivistic way of defining a magazine like the *Architectural Review* as academic or non-academic. Actually I'd go further and say that there isn't any real difference between the feature writing I do for *The World of Interiors* and what I submit to peer review journals. I write to the same standard of accuracy of research; I construct an argument; I make a reasoned judgement. It's a kind of pointless snobbery to say that one is mere journalism, a charge I often hear. Architectural writing in Britain is interesting because it is varied, and it hits at every register. It's a tradition to be proud of. As I see it, professionalisation here should mean no more than consistency in subediting.

The link between this and the subject of undergraduate design teaching is that anyone who is learning to be a designer should feel part of a bigger story rather than excluded from it. The pseudo-professionalisation of peer-review journals in the field of design history and criticism, and the processes that any kind of design investigation has to go through to find funding all drive a wedge between the young person finding their feet and the big history that they should

be becoming part of. And this is exacerbated by the basic problem that I have suggested at the outset – that literary methods and standards are the dominant ones in any Western society, and people whose thinking and working is emotional and instinctive are going to be placed at a disadvantage by funders and managers. My favourite example to date came about when I applied for a position on a design panel of CABE, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. I thought that the questions in their application form would be about my interest in or experience of design and planning. In fact the first question asked if I saw myself as disabled, and the second wanted to know how I defined my sexual orientation. We know that applicants for public support for exhibitions and concerts have been astonished to be asked similar questions by the Arts Council, and that from the newspaper correspondence that ensued we also discovered that contrary to the official line – that these questions are asked for information-gathering purposes only – there are people working in these quangos who genuinely believe that what goes on in the arts can and should be managed to reflect political and word-based definitions that have nothing whatsoever to do with the artistic motivations and aspirations of the people involved. They know they are on dangerous ground when things are done for the sake of it, for the fun and the beauty of it, even for the quality and the technical satisfaction of it.

There is a long history in England, at least from the Reformation onwards, of using political devices to crush aspirations to beauty. An example of why there is a direct practical difference has emerged from my recent dealings with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which funds research in the humanities. We applied for what was described as a 'practice-led' grant to help us with our schools project – which I'll present to you in a moment – on the basis that the people leading the project were architects: one a practitioner, the other a teacher. We were told in a letter, which was itself a masterpiece of modern political jargon and scarcely comprehensible, and had to be translated into normal English over the telephone, that we were ineligible to apply because we couldn't supply the details of an actual building project that we were working on to which this research would become auxiliary. We were neither 'pure' academic researchers, nor were we architects with a job to run. The idea that we might have been somewhere in between, that we believed that people engaged in architectural education should be up against all different kinds of experience of it, was apparently an untickable box.

These attitudes come not only from political expediency; they also come from a culture where a second, third, fourth-rate novel or biography will get more coverage from newspaper reviewers than even the very best books on architecture. That was not the case thirty years ago.

Incidentally, a student of ours last year, Adam Summerfield, came up with an interesting proposal which demonstrates this general position by turning it on his head. He comes from the Medway towns and he had seen a procession of architects demonstrating their proposals for the Chatham riverside in the normal way, through drawings and models. The result each time was a degree of antipathy or incredulity from the public who were consulted. People hated the towers, or the slabs, or whatever it was. Adam's suggestion was that architects could better convey their proposals to the non-visual general public through words, not through pictures; that a narrative piece of fiction, for example, could better describe what it would be like to be there than a series of drawings. Literary people with no visual sense whatsoever can evoke the appearance of a place, through Dickens' fog, or Balzac's provincial mansions, or Ransome's boats or Spark's academies.

What I want to do then is to investigate how teachers in architecture schools can take a stand against the word culture. I've said that modern management and funding methods are reinforcing the literary, as opposed to the visual culture, and I believe that to be an ethical problem because it means that we are spending public money and our students' money doing things which are other from what we and they need to do to perform in accordance with our own professional judgment. The basic ethical question in architectural education is the question of what we are for, and the answer, I hope, is to encourage inspired and capable designers. It seems to me that this requires a measure of revolt against these literary systems on other part. We need to find places for drawing and exhibiting, for building and making, and anything that requires money also requires making alliances. In order to do that we have to stick to the things we know we are good at, we need to form partnerships with people in a similar situation. But we don't want to do things to please other interest groups – build communities, that sort of thing – we want to do it because it is good for us.

We work with students who are there because they were inspired by the experience of places they visited in fact or in their imagination. When these students tell us, as they do, that they want to help others through their work, to use their skills to help society, to make lives more beautiful, even to share building knowledge across the peoples of the world (as one sometimes hears), they will do it because of the feeling of the thing; because of the experience of making and doing it; because of the sense of creating something up from its elements; because of wanting to make and mould. They don't do it to please word-based professionals from other disciplines. If studying architecture becomes more like the teaching of it, with 'ethics' as a

definable consumer-oriented variable determined by the RIBA and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council, no one would want to do it at all.

I've pointed out some of the dangers lurking around the way in which architecture schools are structured as university departments; I want now to look at a way of strengthening the student experience and to also to find allies outside the academic system. In Autumn last year we carried out an experimental project with the pupils of an academy in North Kent. In fact it was our university's outreach department which introduced us to this school, which with its current name is a recent rebranding and restructuring of what had been a non-selective community high school on the edge of a small town just outside the M25 to the south east. The academy has about 1,150 pupils from the ages of 11 to 19, with specialist interests in the arts and science, and also some special needs facilities. It's located in an early 1960s complex of a type typical to the county and familiar to many, and as a result of its rapid conversion to academy status – a tribute incidentally, to how quickly structural changes can happen when there exists the political will to make them – it is going to be rebuilt onto a different part of the same site.

We were looking for a way of introducing children to architecture outside the quantitive way in which it is often presented – either as a historical artefact, as a tallest-highest-longest, or indeed in the modern fashion as a kind of demonstration of a social process. We knew that the university was keen to use our engagement with the school as way of raising attainment and awareness of higher education in non curriculum areas, particularly from schools that hadn't often if at all presented candidates for admission, and I was very happy with that. I knew also that anything we did that involved our students would have to deploy them from the second year, because first-year teaching is too sensitive, and the third year too loaded up with RIBA and Architects' Registration Board requirements; indeed, we all know that second-year teaching is often the most difficult, so a new way of looking at it was worth a try. Dylan Haughton, an architect in London who is a regular design tutor, took over responsibility for running the project and he and I devised the way in which it would be run. The idea was that the pupils would initiate and supervise the design, by the students, of extensions and alterations to their school. Our second year students generally do a project in the autumn term in which they adapt and extend an existing building, so it made sense for this academy project to run alongside it chronologically.

For most of the project we worked in partnership with a well known charity that deals with promoting art and design in schools. They have many ideas and considerable experience in this

field, although not of working with architecture schools. They pulled out of the project without explanation just before its conclusion; it may be that they felt that the restrictions imposed on us in order to deliver a validated architecture course interfered too much with the way in which they generally liked to do things. Our students for example had to produce a portfolio of their own, rather than group work, by the end of term; and of course they could not abandon their commitment to address the project in architectural terms – schematic, environmental, structural, historical and so on, in order to suit the charity's approach. Perhaps because of this and mismatches in the institutional timetables of all three bodies, I regret to say that the relationship became strained towards the end of the project. I have to say that this somewhat confirmed what I suspected, that architecture schools have few natural allies outside when it comes down to it. I think, and I hope, that the relationship can be repaired in the future, but this coming year we are going it alone. Incidentally our relationship with the academy and indeed the pupils has been excellent throughout, and because of that our own university itself is anxious to repeat and to fund the project again.

Our students met the pupils at their academy approximately fortnightly. The pupils we met with came from the whole age range of the school, although needless to say it was the younger rather than the older ones who participated most, because the older ones were inhibited by being with children who were much younger. We essentially took over their art classes. The academy's timetable required us to meet different groups on occasion so there wasn't as much continuity as we had hoped. The brief for the project was fairly fluid, with days spent doing different things, and this is helping us create a more defined brief this year. Dylan Haughton has made the interesting point that the pupils engaged best when they were encouraged to express their ideas visually, rather than programmatically. The usual working basis of the charity we were working with was that the pupils would act as clients, formulating things such as use of rooms and hierarchy of activities; but in fact, as Dylan has put it, the pupils displayed insight and awareness when they approached their tasks visually, To give you an example of what he means, the pupils could trace movement patterns between buildings on a plan, and model new spaces on the resulting drawing, better than they could put the same thing into words. We also found that pupils responded well to looking at things like the relationship of the school buildings to the site as whole, and how it might be changed, and it was rewarding to push them to address ideas about this, not least because there isn't any other framework in their education which would even raise the subject. We adopted an idea of the charity we were working with by adopting a professional 'mentor' for the undergraduates during the course of the project, in this case Heinz Richardson from Jestico + Whiles, who are the architects appointed for the design of

the real building that is going up. Incidentally, one of the problems we had is that students are nowadays so conditioned into measuring themselves against lists of exam board criteria, lists of boxes of submission requirements to tick, that we found that many were disorientated when they compared their results to what their peers had been doing when undertaking a more conventional design project. It was hard to explain that you are learning and creating by going through a shared process of making and designing as much as when you are following a more defined programme of study. And yet the spread of their resulting grades was at least as good as those of the rest of the year, indicating that they had not been disadvantaged as a result of doing it.

We had to end up with a portfolio of individual designs for each of our own students, which means that the possibility of working in groups was limited at least after the first few weeks of the project. Our students also had to produce environmental and climatic control schemes, not to mention fire escape strategies and so on, for the new building they designed. But this gave an agreeable hard edge to the project. They had to define and focus on providing the new areas that the pupils wanted; they had to turn feeling about places into real objects. In fact when we rerun this project this coming year I want to ensure that this is done more systematically: that we try out more ways of recording colours, shapes, models and textures, to see whether the pupils respond more to others, or whether they can display a developing sensibility to these things over the course of the project. It doesn't seem to matter in the slightest that children might come up with ideas that are unrealistic or unrealisable; if that's encouraged it will guide them, I hope, towards an acceptance later on of solutions that are more than simply functional. In fact in general I think there's more to be gained by the pupils seeing themselves entirely as designers rather than as potential clients.

I'm sure it is true, as has been suggested by at least one writer on design, that people form an idea in their heads of their ideal home or built environment at a very young age, and I would be interested in seeing whether any sense of that can be captured. I should say that I don't actually believe (and this is only my feeling from experience, not the result of any research) that children have very much to contribute to the process of design by adults, or indeed that they have much in the way of any useful sensibility to it at the time of being young. What I do think though is that it must be good for us, as architects and teachers of architecture, to build up interest and support wherever we can for what it is we are doing. I hope that later in life they will remember these things and have some sympathy for them, whatever it is they end up doing. I think that

architects have to look for friends wherever they can, and if that means making use of an opportunity in a school curriculum then so much the better.

But I also think it is good for us more generally in architecture schools to make friends with the people who live in our own region. I think of this as a matter of common sense and expediency rather than from a position of principle, although I agree that the advantages of it are mutual and real, and could be long lasting and profitable. My interest in this aspect of what architecture schools ought to be doing was sharpened by a characteristically unhelpful intervention by the president of the RIBA in September 2007 when he said that schools had a duty to make themselves more appealing to a broader section of the population by changing their curricula to make their historical teaching more inclusive. What he said was

> It's an easy win for schools of architecture. A little change to the curriculum, a little mix of culture and different cultural solutions will benefit everyone.[2]

This seemed to me an astonishing point of view, especially for an architect to make: it was arguing that people weren't attracted to architectural schools if they had, say, a Caribbean or an Asian family background and this background was not reflected in the architecture history curriculum. It is obviously the case that a school would have to have an awful lot of time for architectural history, plus an unrealistic amount of teaching resources, if it actually was going to offer all these subjects to a reasonable extent. And that's not to mention the patronising and divisive attitude to the supposed ethnic groups: my background is part Iraqi and part Staffordshire: where, I wonder, would I go for an architecture school that suited me? What I did ask myself however was what an architecture school could do in order to be more genuinely part of its region. I think that that means going out to different places, different people, making ourselves known, and thinking of things to do with other groups of people that are based around designing and making and exhibiting, preferably with very little practical application. If people in that area, whatever their background, see the architecture school as being an interesting and fun place to be, maybe a demanding place to be, they will, if they have any aptitude at all, be more likely to want to try to get into it. Essentially, I think that more than anything else, architecture schools are there to ensure that student designers have having a good time first of all, so they enjoy what they are doing; but also that they are continually stretched to their limits, are forced to interact with different situations, are having to answer new problems, are able to access new ideas and methods of designing, drawing, and constructing, and are able to share a common visual language with as many people as possible around them. None of those obvious

things that can be taken for granted if government and university structures continue to pressurise architecture schools into becoming factory farms for meeting definable criteria drawn up by literary and scientific people. But by reaching out and by concentrating on what they are good at, architecture schools will promote their own values, build up friends and create alliances – and also, more importantly than anything else, they will get to be good at what they are supposed to be good at, rather than at reacting to and manoeuvring around the type of demands made by people who don't understand, and if anything are inimical to, the type of thing we want to do in the first place.

Notes

[1] Loach, Judi, and Kezer, Zeynep, 'Architectural history at a crossroads: research challenges and opportunities', in the *Newsletter* of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, 96, Winter 2008/9.

[2] http://www.bdonline.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=426&storycode=3095814