

Un-Messy Realism and the Decline of the Architectural Mind

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Teach

Un-Messy Realism and The Decline of the
Architectural Mind

Mark Jarzombek

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The last ten years have seen subtle changes in architectural education, so subtle that one cannot identify one or the other school or one or the other approach as playing a leading role. The basic fact, however, is indisputable: the pedagogical systems that were put in place in the postmodernist era of the 1970s and that were developed in the '80s and '90s are slowly and irrevocably dying. Their skeletons are still moving about, giving the appearance of still being alive, but the body is withering. This is no lament; history is dynamic, and change inevitable. But when—and how—will we come to terms with these changes?

The irony is that the current architectural education in the U.S. is in its most uncontroversial position in decades, sitting comfortably within a political domain that is essentially capitalist and centrist. In some places, the increasingly pervasive agenda of the phenomenologists has pushed architecture even further to the right or has at least eaten away at the more liberal-leaning agendas of the former pop-culturalists. Similarly, Sustainability has all but purged itself of the old leftist associations. And as to History-Theory, which had originally served as a type of intellectual corrective to the excesses of postmodern neo-historicism, it is being increasingly pushed aside as not relevant to practice or as introducing issues so remote as to be considered distractions to the mind of the young architect. Topics like philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature, and even painting and film, once central to debates about the nature and purpose of architecture, are now pursued haphazardly at the very margins of architectural education. Architecture's messy disciplinary nature is being cleaned up, sanitized, and simplified.

What stands before us is a historical moment of great significance. I am not trying to condemn this moment, for there

are aspects of this transformation that are yet unknown and thus undeveloped; it can still produce good architecture, but the question I am trying to raise is, Can it produce good architectural discourse? There is a big difference. The future of architectural education is dependent on the latter, not on the former.

Though the rapid growth of computation and technology in architectural teaching has added to the demise of discourse, this in itself is not the cause, but has created a symptomatic response in the form of a claim for a return to "practice." But the call to practice does not fill the gap and anyway should be recognized for what it is, a convenient cover for a system of education adrift in academic uncertainty. Possibly worse, it is a cover for a pernicious anti-intellectualism. Practice, I would argue, is a field of cultural production; it is not about how one makes a building. The sooner we expose the practices-of-practice, the better architecture will be. That was certainly the ambition of both Modernism and Postmodernism. The interrogation of practice—and the special role that a non-practice practice had within that interrogation—has gone by the wayside or withered itself down into banal critiques of the star architects.

Frederic Jameson, once the darling of intellectuals, has disappeared somewhere. But it was not just one or the other theorist or philosopher that energized architectural discourse. Architectural academe defined itself as challenging the conventions of practice. In fact, the M.Arch program was originally designed to do just that; put together in the 1970s their purpose was to elevate architectural education (and practice) in the eyes of academe. They aimed to bring in more mature students with different and interesting backgrounds as well as professors with a deeper appreciation for architectural culture. The M.Arch program was a dialectical response to corporate modernism, and for a while it certainly worked. But now it is the victim of its own success.

This does not mean that excellent pedagogies don't exist today. A few years ago MIT held a conference on pedagogy, and recently so did Columbia University and other places, with several speakers presenting their approaches. But the truth was that the line between pedagogy and PR was frequently blurred. There was a lot of epistemology, but no episteme.

The strangeness of our architectural teaching is nowhere more visible than when we study the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB), which at first accredited only the lower reaches of the academic food chain, namely the Bachelor degree, but now accredits the M.Arch as well, though it makes no distinction between these two degree programs! The NAAB accreditation board, just a year ago, voted in favor of creating an D.Arch, a doctorate of architecture, equivalent to a law school degree, thus increasing the range of their control. So now we have not only two but three so-called "first professional degree programs." And with the old bachelor programs in many schools being retooled into M.Arch programs by allowing the last year to count as "graduate level," and M.Arch programs sounding more and more like graduate-level versions of the old B.Arch programs, we have nothing short of a massive confusion in the pedagogical environment about where to locate architecture discourses. Architectural pedagogy is basically being flattened—and repressed—and all of us, myself included, who teach in schools of architecture are in one way or another part of this tragedy.

Concomitant with the increasing bureaucratization of academe is the fact that in recent decades we have faced the rise of the power of the architectural profession with important complicating consequences for pedagogical practice. Twenty

years ago the balance between large architectural firms and one-designer and small to mid-sized firms was weighted to the small and mid-sized. Eighty percent of firms in the U.S. were small firms. In the last twenty years, one has seen the rapid decline of the number of middle-size firms, most of which were unable to compete under the strain of computer software purchases and the rise of insurance premiums. The pull toward the professionalization and corporatization of design—still understudied and under-theorized—has been felt throughout the US, if not the world, and has had a silent pedagogical imperative that has had only negative consequences erasing the already thin potential for a political gesture into breezy, computer-generated fly-throughs. The advances of women in the field that were made in the 1980s and '90s have slackened, and African-Americans in the field have still not risen to more than 1.5%.

The first thing to do in order to get a handle on the situation is to establish historical doubt about the instruments of power that are embedded in the production of architectural knowledge. I would argue that we must start to see pedagogy no longer through the presumably beneficial system of regulations and activities (that in their final analysis circumscribe the abstractions of The Architect as a good and productive citizen), but, very directly, as an economy of production. This is not easy to do. Of all the books and literature on modern architecture, how many deal with the instrumentalities—and economies—of teaching or the ideology of pedagogy? The reason for this is not the lack of scholars, but the disciplinary cunning that wants to protect pedagogical ideologies from historical critique. This is why I am interested in pedagogy's history, its anthropology and sociology, as a way to get to a history of the present, to diagnose, reformulate, and problematize and thus ultimately to politicize our efforts. To say it succinctly, we have to see pedagogy not as a question of how we train architects, but as a question of how it trains architecture. As much as we would like to see ourselves as productive and meaningful agents of change, we should also see ourselves as part of changes that are far larger than what we can actually control. And this means that what we need is a condition of negative pragmatics in which the limited—and limiting—spatial and temporal conditions of our teaching are allowed to be actually spoken about.

Some examples: over the last decade, the cost of “producing” Ph.D.s in the history and theory of architecture is now in the range of several hundred thousand dollars. This means that the expansion of Ph.D. programs in the future is limited, and that Ph.D.s—though being needed increasingly to feed the ravenous belly of the tenure system—are becoming more and more precious and simultaneously more likely to leave the architectural studio environment where their work is valued less and less. As to teachers of architecture, most of whom now have an M.Arch degree, publishing is difficult since they have to compete with those with Ph.D.s. Think of the trajectory of journals like Oppositions, Assemblage, and Grey Room, and list how many architects contributed to these journals. It gets fewer and fewer, and for Grey Room, probably close to zero. This is not a critique of Grey Room, but an indication, perhaps, that architects have less and less to say. The result is that students become less and less capable of envisioning—and thus participating in—the discourses that define their field.

What I am trying to argue is that a discussion about our teaching is not about how good we are as teachers, or about how many of our students go off to work in the offices of the star architects. It is certainly not how well we conform to NAAB. We have to realize that our discipline is undergoing an inner

transformation of historical import and that sooner or later it will yield an educational system far different from the one we grew up with in the last twenty years. But whether this is for better or for worse is difficult to ascertain since there is also a collusion of silence in academe about where the ghost ship is heading. That is the disturbing part, especially since it is the architecture students who are getting short-changed.

Most Ph.D. programs are now moving toward a five-year package of tuition and stipend. Fifteen years ago, funding was minimal. Ten years ago, the three-year package was the norm. Furthermore, because of the need to finish, the old model where Ph.D. students would supplement their income by working in a firm during the summer to pick up extra dollars is now frowned upon.

