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Should architecture schools focus on a singular teaching approach?

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Student Shows 2014: Essay by Ellis Woodman



How much freedom should a school of architecture offer? In his role as director of the Architectural Association (AA) in the 1970s, Alvin Boyarsky concluded: as much as possible.

The range of positions represented by the tutors teaching at Boyarsky's AA was unprecedentedly broad. While Leon Krier was leading students in the investigation of an urbanism based on 18th century precedents, Rem Koolhaas was directing their attention to the unfulfilled potential of Russian constructivism. Peter Cook was there, expanding Archigram's brand of pop-futurism in a zoomorphic direction while Bernard Tschumi was arguing for an architecture that had no basis in form at all.

If this polyphony of voices lacked cohesion, it nonetheless proved an extraordinarily provocative and liberating environment for students. The full roll-call of graduates from Boyarsky's AA who went on to lead internationally recognised careers would run to many dozens of names. Those of David Chipperfield, Steven Holl, Zaha Hadid, Nigel Coates, Peter Salter, Kathryn Findlay and Ian Ritchie will have to suffice as a suggestion of the diversity of talent that his school helped train.

Four decades on, the Boyarsky model has become the dominant one for British architecture schools. Market Day at the start of each academic year presents the students of many of the UK's schools with the task of picking between a quite bewildering range of studios.

All anxious to bag the best students, successive tutors take to the stage and set out the unique selling point of their studio over the course of an exactly choreographed PowerPoint presentation. Areas of research are defined, each more particular than the last: self-build housing in Palestine; the economy of coastal Essex after another 100 years of global warming; the use of chance as a design procedure; the role of military surveillance technology in a future urbanism.

What a vast and various terrain the field of architecture appears to be on such occasions: an empire, almost, encompassing other disciplines from sociology to media studies, biometrics to fine art. In such an open landscape, the terms by which we might judge the success or failure of all this research are not always easy to locate. Certainly, if our concern lies only with the skills that might be said to constitute architecture's disciplinary core, we may struggle to find much in it of value. I recently saw the work of one UK architecture school in which one in 10 students at best had designed an elevation.

The potential appeal of the Boyarsky model is that it enables a conversation within which the various studios provide a mutual critique. Over the course of their period in education the student should enjoy exposure to a range of positions, the aim being that they learn an independence of mind, rather than merely becoming acolytes. But a commitment to diversity does not, in itself, guarantee a conversation.

Boyarsky assembled his staff room as if throwing a great dinner party, favouring guests who were cosmopolitan, culturally attuned and wouldn't back down from a fight. That collective engagement was what made the AA special.

However, to see the work of many British schools today is simply to encounter a range of highly esoteric and atomised enquiries - localised experiments bearing little obvious relationship to one another nor to the culture of architecture maintained in the wider world.

A studio in such an institution can be an airless place, the line between radicalism and naivety often obscure. There are, of course, schools that conceive of their mission in more focused terms, among them that of the University of Kingston. For the past three years every studio in the school has set its brief in a Unesco World Heritage site, with the aim that their combined output might constitute a form of collective research.

The staff room put together by head of school Daniel Rosbottom is notably more collegiate than Boyarsky's, including studio leaders such as Jonathan Woolf, Pierre d'Avoine, Cathy Hawley and Hugh Strange. All are practising architects making modern architecture with a strong historical awareness. Yet, if that range can be said to represent a tendency, it is one broad enough to accommodate a studio focused on the development of the classical tradition, run by Timothy Smith and Jonathan Taylor.

Their inclusion helps ensure the place doesn't become too cosy: a key challenge for a school that hopes to maintain a cohesive cultural position. When I began studying at Cambridge in the early 1990s the architecture school had been under the sway of professor Dalibor Vesely for the better part of a decade and had certainly become a victim of his success. Teachers were almost all former students and given to the use of an inherited vocabulary of self-protective obscurantism. A uniquely indecipherable drawing technique had also long been de rigueur, based on the use of shoe polish, white ink and cellulose thinners. Lacking challenge, the experimental had ossified into dogma. To judge by its recent end-of-year show, the Cass is addressing that necessity for reinvention more persuasively. A number of names long associated with the school, such as Peter St John, Tony Fretton and Stephen Taylor, are again heading studios that offer an intense concentration on the design of buildings.

However, the work of the Robert Mull-headed Free Studio and those run by the AOC and DSDHA suggest a second tendency: one that offers students more open-ended terms of engagement with the city.

The line between the two streams is not hard and fast and both students and staff cross it from year to year. They represent parallel, not opposed lines of enquiry. What was exciting about this year's Cass show was the sense that the school had developed a more complex and inclusive identity without abandoning its core values.

The diversity amounted to something more than relativism: it served as the foundation for the kind of dialogue that every architecture school needs to sustain.

Ellis Woodman is the AJ's critic-at-large

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