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Research

The state of architectural education

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The state of architectural education

Architecture is still being taught: in technical schools, academies, faculties of architecture, and in postgraduate institutes for advanced talent. These courses take place in buildings with a name and an address. There are student bodies and teaching staff and they communicate with one another on the basis of curricula and course requirements, attainment targets and exams. There would seem to be nothing amiss.

Architecture is a profession and to master it you go to school.

Time was when such schools could confidently assume that the knowledge they were passing on was absolute. There was a canon, there were rules and there was a sense of vocation so that you knew what you were doing it for: for God, your country or another, better world. As an architect you were an initiate of a profession, a school or an ideology – all categories of exclusion, in that anyone who was not an initiate could not, in effect, be a real architect. This exclusion was reinforced by a strong professionalization, culminating in the protection of the title of architect.

And behold, no sooner was the title protected than people started wondering what in fact distinguished an architect from anyone else involved in the creation of space or the processes of construction. Alongside the familiar 'design' architects, there were now architects who specialized in the management and production aspects of building; there were architects who provided concepts, aesthetic monitoring or fantastical constructions and architects who concentrated on draughting, detailing and site supervision. Or perhaps these were not true architects?

Nobody knew for sure. What was certain, was that architecture was losing its grip on its core competencies: the conception, design and elaboration of buildings and the supervision of their realization. The boundaries of the profession were blurring. Everybody was getting in on the architectural act, while for their part architects were dabbling in a host of other disciplines. In such a free-for-all, exclusion – at least on the grounds of pure learning and expertise – is not easy. Architecture had ceased to be a rigorously defined academic discipline.

And something else happened to deprive architectural education of a clear sense of what it was all about. In the past, architecture had always possessed a clear cultural significance. There were styles, which said something about an ideology, a region or the personal views of the client. There were building types, with a corresponding form by which that type could be identified. There were different levels of scale, appropriate to the size of a particular programme. These were all things that could be learned and remembered for a lifetime. But now such remembering seems to be more of a handicap than a benefit. There is much more demand for the ability to think up strategies, to play with form, to design thematically harmonious worlds. Style, form, type, programme – you are better off inventing them from scratch. Preferably in an all-encompassing hybrid.

So this is the dilemma facing architectural education. On the one hand it must retain enough basic knowledge to justify a curriculum and thus schools; on the other hand it must foster a climate in which creativeness flourishes and the evocative power can develop. There will be no lack of talent, for these are precisely the conditions that talent covets. The question is, can the schools do justice to this talent?

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