

## OPINION

### SUGGESTED REFORMS OF ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

**James Stevens Curl\***

Holywood (Belfast), UK

#### 1. Practicality versus fantasy

When I was an undergraduate, it was fashionable among those of an iconoclastic disposition (that is, those who had absorbed uncritically the tenets of Modernism) to express the desire to destroy all old buildings, especially cathedrals, churches, museums, country-houses, and all works of architecture with Classical porticoes because they were either ‘irrelevant’ or ‘intimidating’. Capitals on columns, pilasters, and piers, of course, were ‘*élitist*’ and had to be eschewed. The iconoclasts preferred to copy the latest *clichés* from pictures in one of the ‘architectural’ magazines to expending any effort on learning about what real architecture might possibly be (Curl, 2003). Thus high culture was betrayed.

With the advent of Deconstructivism and Parametricism, computers have been recruited to aid a new wave of derivative architecture informed by fashionable figures such as the late Zaha Hadid. Complex blobs churned out from a computer and expensively printed will not make things better or resolve massive global problems, and not just in the West. Probably the only answer is to rethink the whole question of architectural education and revert to a mixture of apprenticeship and guided study, exposing students (having liberated them from the suffocating confines of the ‘compound’: the cult-like group of ideologues focused only upon a narrow ideology) to the general public, to the real problems of design failures, and to the experiences of recent graduates and those involved in practice.

The main problem will be to clear minds of cant, removing the taint of Corbusianity and its priesthood (still enshrined, even in the convoluted texts of Parametricism (Schumacher, 2016)), and to demonstrate, in a wide variety of exemplars, how design solutions that actually produced results that worked well on every level, practically and aesthetically, might be emulated and developed today. A Reformation in architectural education is long overdue. The present system does not work (Wainwright, 2013).

#### 2. Between academia and practice

First of all, there needs to be a proper recognition of the rather obvious point that not everything an architect needs to know can be taught in a school of architecture. This is recognised in the seven-year model of architectural education in the UK consisting of 3 years in university + 1 in practice + 2 in university + 1 in practice). However, while the

---

\* Prof. James Stevens Curl, Holywood (Belfast), UK, e-mail: [jscurl@btinternet.com](mailto:jscurl@btinternet.com)

structure may be right (and that is in itself a matter for debate), the devil is as always in the detail of what actually *happens* in each year.

If tutors are self-indulgent and teach what they want to teach as opposed to what needs to be taught, and if practices treat young graduates as CAD (Computer-Aided Design) fodder, then the process simply does not work. Ten years' experience, in reality, becomes one year's experience repeated ten times. Thus the first reform necessary is a new covenant between academia and practice that makes explicit the rôle and responsibility each has in preparing young people for architectural practice.

One of the main problems at present is the lack of historical knowledge among design tutors in schools of architecture: this is the result of twentieth-century changes in architectural education influenced by Modernist dogma, which abandoned history altogether. In schools which consider themselves primarily either vocational or design schools, students spend most of their time with tutors, and are very susceptible to what those tutors (mainly young, or youngish, practising architects) tell them, which is to promote whatever fashionable 'iconic' structure they favour (usually with curious shapes, extremely expensive to design and construct, and irrelevant to most architectural practice in reality) (Sklair, 2017). So much of the problem in architectural education lies in the profession itself: architectural design in a vacuum makes little sense without a contextual and historical anchor, something early critics of Modernism realised (Mehaffy & Salingaros, 2013).

Teachers in schools of architecture need to recognise that 'didactic' (as in 'didactic teaching') is not a dirty word. Young people do not absorb skills by a kind of osmosis in the studio, as some seem to imagine. It is no more possible to design a building without understanding the language of architecture than it is to write meaningful prose without a developed vocabulary, an understanding of syntax and grammar, and of course a little inspiration and soul.

Therefore, the second reform might be a recognition of the need for the delivery and development of basic skills (really looking — which means understanding by means of detailed note-taking and sketches —, drawing, critical reading, critical writing) in schools of architecture.

An architect needs to understand and be informed by both geography and history, and by the fundamental interrelationship of the two. There is much talk of the *genius loci* (spirit of the place, for every place has its own unique qualities, not only in terms of its physical makeup, but of how it is perceived, so it ought to be [but far too often is not] the responsibility of the architect to be sensitive to those qualities, to enhance rather than to destroy them), without any concern for what that might mean, how an understanding of it might be arrived at, and, most importantly, how a design might respond to it.

Students often struggle to properly understand a site selected for them to prepare their designs both at a macro- and micro-scale: they carry out a huge amount of analysis which is either of no help in arriving at a solution or is carefully filed away and forgotten once 'designing' begins. So a third reform could be to make the analysis, understanding, and response to place an explicit continuum. Uncoupling architecture from place leads to meaningless ephemeral architecture that is here today, and, sadly, not gone tomorrow.

### 3. The long-term value of a degree

Sixty percent of undergraduates who read for a degree in architecture do not go on to practise as architects. That is not failure. People who study law do not all become lawyers, and people who study English do not all become writers, but they should be intellectually enriched by their university education. Schools of architecture often see their rôle exclusively as preparing students for practice, which may be true at Master's level, but is only true for the minority at undergraduate level.

Schools of architecture can serve all their students best by providing a good, general, arts and humanities education with an understanding of real science, technology, and management. Graduates should leave university seeing the world in a different way from that they perceived when they entered, and with an appreciation of what makes 'culture' in the widest sense of the word, and that would include history and the importance of religious history as well.

The cost and value of an architectural education need to be reviewed. A five-year course at university adds up to a very expensive business, exacerbated by probably not being the best preparation for a life in architectural practice. Some combination (particularly at Master's level) of university and practice-based pupillage or apprenticeship would allow students to 'learn and earn': this would have the added advantage of widening access to architecture as a profession for those excluded by inability to pay.

There is also an argument in favour of undergraduates working in practices for a year *before* they commence their studies. Offices would thus make a contribution to their low-paid labour. Universities seem unable to accept the idea that only students intending to qualify as architects should enter departments to study: a year working in offices should help students to concentrate minds and enable the non-committed to drop out. Students wishing to proceed would also start full-time at universities with some savings.

### 4. Learning from what exists and works

Finally, there is the issue of 'style'. Schools of architecture see architectural expression in a particular way (often a re-heating of the tutors' own architectural education served up in new[ish] containers). Style is about much more than appearance and surface decoration (or an absence of the latter): in any case, the long history of architectural 'decoration' was concerned with symbolism, meaning, emphasis, and much more (Cassou, 1984; Hiscock, 2007). Its expulsion by Modernism demonstrated a complete misunderstanding of its origins, history, and purpose.

Students must be taught that what they do as architects will awaken *something* in those who look upon it (even those who pass it by in distraction and even those not yet born), and better it be joy than horror. The design of buildings and the shaping of the urban fabric to which they contribute (or from which they detract) are awesome, onerous responsibilities (it is hard to imagine greater), not to be taken lightly or arrogantly imposed from some dogmatic stance adopted from a manifesto.

Students should therefore be set exercises to study existing towns, cities, and streets: how they were planned, developed, and damaged; how materials were used; how buildings relate to each other (or not); how the grain, texture, and geometries of a street are formed of different buildings in juxtaposition; and how to develop a respect for the

contexts into which new buildings are slotted. Those who aspire to be architects should leave university in no doubt that this is the burden (and the joy) they bear, and therefore realise they must exercise their ‘craft or sullen art’ (Thomas & Goodby, 2017) with the greatest care, attention, and sensitivity, nurtured by immersion in an historical understanding of the wider meanings of culture.

Architectural education, therefore, should commence with studies of existing historic buildings of quality and several different styles, involving detailed surveys and the production of finely crafted measured drawings. Such studies should embrace how materials are used, how details work, and how features such as mouldings help buildings to weather gracefully (or not). These exercises should be accompanied by a programme of reading about historical architecture and writing essays on selected topics to encourage techniques of historical research and the ability to write clear, unambiguous, properly referenced English. At present students are expected to work in a kind of vacuum, insulated from history, culture in its widest sense, and an understanding of the contexts within which buildings were designed and erected.

Unfortunately, many of their tutors are also products of a system from which much that is essential has been omitted, so architects with a knowledge of history and steeped in wider culture should be encouraged and actively recruited in order to fill *lacunae*. It might be necessary to establish some sort of national network of talks and lectures for trainees, aimed to set architecture within a wider culture, and not merely treated within its own ‘box’.

## **5. The dangers of Western architectural fashions**

Much architecture in the West, regrettably, has become empty, uncouth, trashy, ill-mannered (in that it pays no respect to its context), often threatening, and in artistic terms, worthless (Buchanan, 2015). Practitioners, mouthing cant about affordability, ethical regeneration, sustainability, and which ever fashionable aims float in the polluted air at the time, behave like Philip Johnson’s ‘whores’ (Howard, 2016; Jencks, 1990; Lewis & O’Connor, 1994), slavering at the sight of the money-bags of anyone with eye-watering off-shore ‘investments’. With interests a-plenty in places like China and the Middle East as well, they seem oblivious to the truth that the world in which they bask is stratospherically distant, light-years away from the humdrum, deadly lives of the unfortunates trying to scratch a living or keep afloat in an increasingly unpleasant environment, who are affected and bludgeoned daily by monuments to the cupidity of monstrous egos untouched by spiritual or compassionate values. And, alarmingly, what seems to have escaped many is that Modernism is essentially Westernisation.

Yet the West took a long time to modernise, and managed it up to a point, but now cultures that are not Western are attempting to rush to *be* Western or are having Westernisation *imposed* upon them far too quickly. As this happens, massive damage is caused, and those cultures are destroyed or at the very least badly weakened, stressed, and corrupted, creating huge problems that never seem to have concerned Western commentators, and still do not (al-Sabouni, 2016; Rotbard, 2015).

Overwhelmingly dangerous resentments are being generated, and this will lead inevitably to a West that has discarded its culture, history, and values being out-produced and out-reproduced. There are already signs of extreme hatreds against the West, backed by fanatical religious fundamentalism that seems incomprehensible to

Western pundits who myopically and arrogantly discounted religion decades ago (Wood, 2016). Every overbearing piece of whatever is the current Western architectural fashion that is realised in non-Western cultures is an aggressive statement. Theodore von Laue's great book, *The World Revolution of Westernization*, (von Laue, 1987) lucidly sets out the arguments, backed by impeccable scholarship and perceptive insights.

**Acknowledgments.** I am indebted to Peter Walker for his observations, some of which are encapsulated here. Parts of this essay are extracted from the author's book (Curl, 2018).

## References

- Al-Sabouni, M. (2016). *The Battle for Home: The Vision of a Young Architect in Syria*, Thames & Hudson, London.
- Buchanan, P. (2015). Empty Gestures. *The Architectural Review*, 25 February.
- Cassou, J. (1984). *The Concise Encyclopedia of Symbolism*, Omega Books, Ware, Hertfordshire, UK.
- Curl, J.S. (2003). *Classical Architecture: An Introduction to its Vocabulary and Essentials, with a Select Glossary of Terms*, W.W. Norton, New York & London: page 10.
- Curl, J.S. (2018). *Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- Hiscock, N. (2007). *The Symbol at Your Door: Number and Geometry in Religious Architecture of the Greek and Latin Middle Ages*, Ashgate, Aldershot, UK.
- Howard, H. (2016). *Architecture's Odd Couple: Frank Lloyd Wright and Philip Johnson*, Bloomsbury Press, London: page 276.
- Jencks, C. (1990). *The New Moderns: from Late to Neo-Modernism*, Academy Editions, London: pages 139-169.
- Lewis, H. & O'Connor, J. (1994). *Philip Johnson: The Architect in His Own Words*, Rizzoli International Publications, New York.
- Mehaffy, M.W. & Salingaros, N.A. (2013). A Vision for Architecture as More Than the Sum of Its Parts: How Modernist Fundamentalism degrades the human and natural environment. *On the Commons*, 11 November 2013.
- Rotbard, S. (2015). *White City Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*, Pluto Press, London.
- Schumacher, P., Editor (2016). *Parametricism 2.0: rethinking architecture's agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century AD*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ.
- Sklair, L. (2017). *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities, and Capitalist Globalization*, Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford.
- Thomas, D. & Goodby, J. (2017). *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*. New Directions, New York: "In My Craft or Sullen Art", 1946.
- Von Laue, T.H. (1987). *The World Revolution of Westernization: The Twentieth Century in Global Perspective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Wainwright, O. (2013). Towering folly: why architectural education in Britain is in need of repair. *The Guardian Architecture and Design Blog*, 30 May.
- Wood, G. (2016). *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State*, Allen Lane, London.

**Received:** 18 December 2019;  
**Accepted:** 18 December 2019;  
**Published:** 30 December 2019.