

## **OPINION**

### **WHAT WAS TAUGHT AND WHAT WAS NOT LEARNED**

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#### **1. Contradictions within architectural education**

Students and professors of several architecture schools in the UK signed a petition calling for institutions to address the ecological, political, and social basis and impacts of the practice (Architecture Education Declares, 2019). Dr. Nikos Salingaros responded to the petition with a primary question: “Is it realistic to expect architectural education to change?” and stated that “*Hope exists only in developing an alternative education outside the mainstream.*” (Salingaros, 2019).

I can confirm that. Teaching sustainable, life-enhancing, land-enhancing *making* must form the core of any responsible architecture school. Yet, in most cases, it is either neglected or treated as an add-on to corporate design mentality.

Among tens of projects at a recent architectural degree show, only a handful were concerned with the sustainability of the designs, and even those which were wrestling with this crisis had questionable approaches. The ‘Sustainable’ designs were dominated by cubes and skyscrapers on one hand (not very sustainable), and ‘organic’ blob architecture on the other. All of them were supposed to be constructed with industrial processes and materials: good-old concrete and metal structures, and lots of glass, green-washed with as many trees as possible (on the renderings), and glittered with ‘revolutionary’ concepts and technologies (Mehaffy & Salingaros, 2013).

Each design promised that it could save the world, yet there was no analysis of how they would actually be sustainable or even possible; the main duty of the student was to come up with such concepts and present them skillfully, without needing any reliable scientific examination. The ‘best’ of such concepts find their ways into the field’s mainstream media, *ArchDaily* (Walsh, 2019) and *Dezeen* (Ravenscroft, 2019), illustrating what hopeful students should seek to emulate.

There is a contradiction between what is taught to us to be *our role* as architects, and what is taught to us *in practical terms* to fulfill such a role. Architectural education can never respond to the current political and ecological crisis because of, as Salingaros notes as well, its “deep internal contradictions”.

#### **2. The architect, for and against the world**

From the very early stages of our architecture education, we are persuaded to see ourselves as innovators, to push ourselves to be so; to be creative, to be constantly

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coming up with “new solutions” of unthought-of forms, designs, and structures. We are taught to adore mysteriously gifted idols who constantly “change the way we look at architecture”. However, although rarely admitted, this push for innovation and creativity is upheld not for necessarily solving problems, but to be new for the sake of being new, while forcefully rejecting any simple old solution.

This approach is fueled by a pursuit of individuality that is central, yet sometimes implicit, in our current architecture education and practice. The modern architect seeks to be different, to be a star, to be visually creative (at any cost), to have a *signature*, to be new, to be modern, and to be an innovator.

This type of architect — who seeks to be caring about collective human society and the planet — has a dilemma at the core of his/her practice: to either go along with innate artistic taste, and so create structures that are truly adapted to and *one* with their environment, *or* to force them to be in some way unique and distinguishable (which is what is now taught). Look at the Glasgow School of Art building, built on top of a Mackintosh building in a quirky neighborhood in Glasgow (Frearson, 2014). How could an institution that not only does not object to, but celebrates such intervention, ever be capable of creating a sustainable, wholesome world?

Thousands of years of sustainable architecture are disregarded partly because a student cannot shine as brightly (both at the university, and in practice) with a simple vernacular building. Showing off *your* (not anybody else’s) genius, *your* concepts, and *your* forms takes first place, disregarding the real depth and sustainability of the design. The individualism that is promoted in architecture school is inherently at odds with any true sustainability. Interestingly, however, you are only considered to be creative if you conform to the modernist typology.

### **3. The expert who knows nothing**

A typical student spends only a handful of hours studying thousands of years of sustainable, beautiful building tradition. He/she knows not much of ecology, plants, or landscape. Trained mainly as an ‘artist’, his/her understanding of materials, structures, and anything technical is not extensive. Moreover, by only focusing on pure design, this artist is not taught to make anything beautiful with his/her own hands.

Mainstream architectural education mainly revolves around abstract visual ‘design’. But you can ask architecture students what they learned about *how* to design, and I doubt you would get a clear, concrete answer. The process of design as a rather mystified exploration is basically what an architecture student ‘learns’ for *five* years! But not much practical, technical, hands-on knowledge. Moreover, the student does not know how to design in an adaptive, land-sustaining, land-enhancing way.

Yet a selfless adaptive design process, which used to be the main regulating force in the unfolding of our beloved traditional cities and buildings, is not only not taught in architecture schools, it is actively barred. A student who loves simple traditional buildings is encouraged not to make anything like them.

To make a wholesome world, one needs to be able to make things with his/her own hands, beyond the world of 3D software. The pure focus on design has made architecture students lack a good understanding of any building crafts. Real learning comes through making, whereas staring at a laptop for hours a day in an isolated studio

is not education. Let's re-learn the forgotten sensitivity and crafts that are taken away from us by this industrialized world and modernist education.

#### **4. The architect as corporate puppet**

The industrial/globalist system within which today's architect plays a role is fully embraced and even glorified in architecture departments. Any education that seeks to deal with sustainability cannot avoid the elephant in the room and must question the classic business model, and even the division of labor between the architect, the builders, and the client. Instead, in the joyless 'Professional Studies' classes, a restricted and tedious role of the architect is fully accepted and is taught as the only possible way for the architect to exist.

While our industrial systems of production have been proved to be utterly unsustainable, industrially-made construction materials and modular blocks still conquer the hearts of architecture professors and students. Instead of fighting for sustainable building processes, which rely on local materials and passive energy savings, the opposite is encouraged. Mass-produced, efficient, and cheap materials are imposed, with everyone claiming that hands-on building processes are "just *impossible* in modern times". Even worse, the industrial modern world is glorified without any concern for the destruction it has brought upon our planet. Any suggestion of truly adopting lost traditional technologies and building processes is considered to be backwards and not of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Computer software, as the main tool of the students in which they are undoubtedly proficient, enforces this soulless mass-production. The students, meanwhile, remain oblivious to any meaningful alternatives, and stay unaware of the fact that their main skill — creating slick renderings and nice-looking presentations — is yet another marketing technique in order to sell just one more unsustainable, damaging product. The current institutions that enable the work of architects working in this manner are inherently against real sustainability.

Creating this ugliness while contractors make hefty money, vernacular construction and self-builders are deprived of their creativity and freedom, and we the architects are isolated in our architectural offices. This practice must be stopped, not embraced! We should find ways to empower communities to build their own cherished homes, not to help developers market their standardized products. We should bridge the gap between 'designers' and 'builders'.

#### **5. Problems, and points towards reform**

These contradictions clash heavily with what I learned from my wholesome education at the *Building Beauty Program*. (Building Beauty, 2019). My work at the university was totally different. Teachers there objected to my projects as being too 'aesthetic', while highly modernist projects were praised for their 'design'. I was criticized for not having any interesting 'ideas'. Attempting to create something small-scaled, beautiful, harmonious, and comfortable was apparently not good enough as an idea. I was told time and again that it is not possible to build such a building in our times, yet expensive skyscrapers and crazy 'organic' structures were all fine. Modular, easy to mass-produce ones were preferred over my incrementally built structure with a human touch. As an example, the professors were mostly against utilizing smaller paned windows, instead of

good-old floor-to-ceiling glass curtain walls, even though those are extremely unsustainable, hard to maintain, fix, and need to be cleaned all the time. And they are just unattractive.



**Figure:** My housing project. It was condemned and ridiculed by examiners, calling it a ‘Princess house’.

I wonder if such institutions, which could not accept anything beyond the usual business, can give a genuine response to the above-mentioned students’ petition. In response to what is so lacking in most architecture departments today, I suggest the following short list:

- Study Christopher Alexander: *A Pattern Language* (Alexander *et al.*, 1977; Kaat, 2012) and *The Nature of Order* (Alexander, 2001-2004; Kubala, 2011). Investigate the *timeless* elements that make places comfortable and beautiful (Alexander & Ludden, 2005), beyond the “spirit of the age”, or any other modernist jargon.
- Take some time to read critiques of Modernism, by Salingaros and others (Curl, 2019; Masden & Salingaros, 2013; Rennix & Robinson, 2017). These are seldom discussed within the architectural bubble. And instead of avoiding tried vernacular practices, fully explore them.
- Go beyond the software-oriented design practices and learn hands-on building crafts. A sustainable world can only be created by localized intimate making, and not mass-production.

At a time when almost no human endeavor is in tune with the ecological necessities of the planet, it will not be a straightforward task to accomplish full sustainability. However, it is much worse when most architectural institutions simply neglect the damage that is being done to our planet, and in effect, to ourselves.

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