

OPINION

ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION: STILL TRAINING TAILORS FOR THE EMPIRE'S NEW CLOTHES

Michael W. Mehaffy*

Portland, Oregon, USA and Stockholm, Sweden

1. Framing the architectural debate

I have a kind of running debate these days with some of my academic colleagues. I argue that students are woefully unprepared for the responsibilities of the profession, and the emerging challenges of practice. I note that responsible practice demands an evidence-based approach that engages a deeper knowledge of the context of urban systems and their histories. It also requires, I say, the mature skills of problem-solvers and collaborators, literate in a range of skills and knowledge sets, only parts of which are visual literacy and design thinking. Instead, students are seduced by the egocentric temptation to become gigantic object-makers and commodifiers, applying a packaging of spectacular abstract art on what is essentially a form of toxic industrial product.

My colleagues who are defenders of the *status quo* will often respond roughly as follows: “Where have you been? Our schools today have many courses in sustainability, urbanism, programming, user consultation, and many others besides; and students experience teamwork and collaboration in much of their studio work. They get the other technical skills and knowledge they need as interns, or through practice. And you can’t blame architects for the failures of the development industry, regulatory systems, or consumers at large.”

Yes, we can. We can blame, or hold responsible, a profession that has abdicated its leadership over the built environment from a human point of view, and increasingly retreated into abstract formalism as (profitable) spectacle and commodity, or as an insider’s fine-art game for (mostly wealthy) elites. Where this approach has not done outright harm to human beings (degraded public realm, failure to respect daily user experience and quality of life, failure to provide affordance and delight, etc.) it has, at best, turned up its nose at the vast bulk of construction not deemed worthy of its own elite art-statements and “visual culture”. And it has been perfectly content to let that world go pretty much to hell.

I have witnessed this abdication firsthand, in appointments within five architecture schools in five different countries, with visits and lectures at many more, and extensive work in the field with many practitioner teams on a wide variety of projects. And yes, I still find the preparation woefully inadequate and often irrelevant, except for those vanishingly few students who win the starchitecture lottery. The rest mostly become

* Dr. Michael Mehaffy, Sustasis Foundation, Portland, Oregon and Centre for the Future of Places, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden, email: michael.mehaffy@gmail.com

cogs in the production machinery, cranking out products that are not so much different from what they were in 1955: gigantic industrial forms turned into gigantic sculptures, meant to warehouse people and activities. Yes, there are lots of courses in environmental sustainability, adaptive design, human scale, and so on. (I have taught some of them myself). But they are fig leaves on an elephant.

I was recently with a group of architect friends who joked that architects should all be grateful they are not medical professionals — for if so, many would be bankrupted or jailed for malpractice. The pseudoscience, the failure to follow evidence-based norms, the *ex-cathedra* theory, the century-old ideologies, the metaphoric thinking uncontaminated by anything like a true science of settlements — they are all remarkable, I think, and remarkably troubling. Given our looming challenges, this is not OK.

2. The retreat from science

I observed human science components that were, for a time, strong in architecture education at Berkeley and other schools back in the 1970s — but soon after were marginalized and all but shut down. Partly that reaction came in response to a problematic over-claiming from the findings of the human sciences, which were certainly immature back then. Partly there was a radical pendulum swing away from what was perceived as “environmental determinism”. Well, the environment doesn’t “determine” human factors of economic, social, and health conditions — doesn’t determine our degree of connectivity and access and freedom of movement — but it strongly affects them. (If you don’t believe that, try walking through a wall, as my friend Paul Murrain likes to say.)

What replaced the curriculum in the human sciences was what I would call a purist’s “art-led approach”. The driving message was: stick to what you’re good at, architects, namely, as avant-garde art supplies to industry. Stop trying to venture into anthropology, sociology, environmental psychology and other fields. Stick to your visual metaphors and your artistic narratives. (And go ahead and metaphor away about ecology and greenness and humanity and society; but only metaphors, please!)

And so it is metaphors we get — gigantic ones, out of scale, disrupting the traditional and neighborhood fabric, creating unwalkable streetscapes, lacking in the basic accoutrements of human affordance, capacity, scale, and moments of everyday delight. The delight (where it exists) is in circus theatrics — in art spectacle and funhouse antics. “Look at that! An opera house that looks like an iceberg, and we can climb on it!” Meanwhile — in Oslo in this case — a row of forgettable office buildings marches by, a slightly tarted-up version of a denuded 1955. But not to worry, it is very clever, for in plan it looks like a bar code.

This is the vapid, neo-Mad-Men architecture of today: all surface, all costume, all aimed at consumption: an extremely sophisticated form of unsophistication. And it was, and is, created, articulated, refined, and finally rationalized in the schools. This is a corrupted project.

We should not be surprised, then, that this state of affairs has sparked a number of popular revolts, some of them (but not all) part of larger unhealthy populist reactions to an equally unhealthy (and unsustainable) modernity and its discontents. For example, the *Arkitekturupproret* (or “architectural rebellion”) movement in Scandinavia has over

30,000 members, and a cultivated diversity of political inclinations. Their growing clout has played a key role in the denial, for example, of the planning application of the Nobel Museum, a typically outscale neo-modernist insertion into Stockholm's traditional city fabric.

3. The “art-led” approach, and its catastrophes

The abdication of architectural leadership over the general problems of human settlement, in favor of tokenism at best, and elite product packaging at worst, stands in contrast to the aspirations of earlier generations who sought to lead the general and vernacular building culture, notably Arts and Crafts, Bauhaus, Wright's Usonian project, and other examples. We can see their failures today, and fault them for their naivete. But we cannot say that we have learned much from their mistakes. In particular, we have yet to recognize the tragic mistake of allowing the dominance of an “art-led approach” — allowing architecture to become another mere instance of visual culture.

It is more than that (who knew?) and yet it is intimately related to art, as Jane Jacobs pointed out. The art is meant to enrich and illuminate the essential structure of settlement and daily life, not to hijack it. We can recognize, for example, the prosaic forms of the great European cathedrals — essentially straightforward vaulted cruciform plans — which were enriched with vastly complex ornamentation, sculpture, artwork. The same is true for many other cultures across history. It is only in our time that we have chosen to make what Robert Venturi referred to as “ducks” — bizarre, out-scale, sometimes literal or metaphorical representations of someone's expressive or creative urges. We have lost what Venturi called “decorated sheds” — good sturdy structures of settlement, vastly enriched with art in service to life, and not the reverse. Everything is about the great self-conscious art-act, the “look at me” moment of self-absorbed abstraction. We have forgotten the wisdom of Thoreau's remark that “the greatest art is to shape the quality of the day.”

This is not a sustainable path, for it neither produces durable buildings nor a durable civilization. Just as we cannot slap a solar collector on a building and call that sustainable, neither can we slap some abstract patterns on a building, no matter how esoteric, and call that satisfactory fine art. In both cases the integrity of the underlying structure, its fitness for purpose, has to be questioned. (This is an urgent issue given the imperatives of a rapidly urbanizing world and the dawn of a “new urban agenda” (Mehaffy, 2016)).

But I find it is often difficult to argue these points with friends inside the profession and its schools. Under the *status quo*, their fine-art specialism is still rewarded — still offers the cloak of authority and prestige, the prospect of a lucrative career working for powerful corporations, and work praised by critics, validated by fine universities like Berkeley and Harvard and Delft. In the end it is all about the marketable spectacle of the art, and hardly at all about the ordinary human lives around it.

Those incentives — economic, political, professional — have fueled this increasing academic and professional “retreat into art specialism”. It has become a determining philosophy for the discipline. And it has made architects all the more vulnerable to irresponsible use of design by industry, and by other unaccountable forces. As Rem Koolhaas has said (with what seems rather like a twinkle in the eye) “*we of course work*

enthusiastically for clients we readily describe as tyrants and occupiers... there are the many reasons to question our sincerity and motives.” (La Giorgia, 2007).

Is this not a persuasive case for the need for educational reform? More focused on human need, on social problems, on the responsibility of professionals to help to promote a functional, just and democratic society? This is not an easy project, to be sure. We are fighting the inherent cognitive limitations of human beings, their psychological distance and cognitive biases, their ability to rationalize and self-delude. I am reminded of the Upton Sinclair quote, *“It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.”*

We are also fighting a “systems problem” — namely, the self-perpetuating dynamics of the current “operating system for growth”. All of the incentives and disincentives, the financial rewards and penalties, the regulatory structures, the laws, codes, standards, protocols, models, and theories, have become wired-in to the current paradigm of settlement and technology. For all our emphasis on disruption and change, so much of the “change” in our system is merely on the surface — rearranging technological deck chairs on a sinking Titanic. We have to slog through and change the wiring, change the “operating system”, to re-focus on a more adaptive, more responsive, more human-focused kind of design. And it has to start in the schools.

4. Looking outside of architecture

An instructive example comes from the computer science realm, which seems from the outside to be the ultimate old-fashioned linear, reductionist technology, “arted up” with various product packages. But beneath the surface, something much more interesting is going on. Emerging new kinds of practice are leading in a more whole-systems direction, a more human-centered and evolutionary direction. They include innovations like Agile Methodology, wiki, and design patterns. These innovations are re-wiring the software world, creating a more integrated and more responsive form of technology, that is also (no coincidence) more evidence-based, and more adaptive to human and natural worlds.

And this revolution actually started in architecture. Specifically, it started in the pattern language technology of the architect Christopher Alexander, who was seeking a more whole-systems, web-networked basis for design, beginning with his landmark 1964 book *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*, and later, the book *A Pattern Language*. My Colleague Ward Cunningham and others applied these insights to the “design patterns” field, and later to Agile and wiki. (Ward invented wiki as a direct outgrowth of his work with pattern languages, as he and I documented in the paper, “Wiki as Pattern Language” (Cunningham & Mehaffy, 2013)).

It is especially relevant here to note that, with this technology, Alexander was challenging the then-current architectural paradigm, and proposing an alternative pathway that was intended to be more evidence-based, more falsifiable, and more adaptive to actual local human needs. That debate became increasingly acrimonious, in Berkeley where he was based, and elsewhere. Alexander became an ostracized figure, as the counter-narrative doubled down on its neo-modernist, metaphor-driven ideologies — to the point that most architects today are ignorant of pattern language applications in other fields, and mostly ignorant of Alexander’s true contributions to the science of settlement (which I have described elsewhere (Mehaffy, 2019)). No doubt Alexander

made his mistakes, as could be said of any investigator. He is a complex figure, and worthy of much more careful study in the future. No doubt too, the man drew some blood in his attacks, which helps to explain some of the vitriol of the responses against him.

Well, reform is always slow work. Sometimes the people who need to be persuaded most are not the defenders of the current paradigm — for it is too late for them — but another generation to come. We might need to build an entirely new system of architecture education, and bypass the existing one (thus avoiding the wearing conflicts with an entrenched pedagogy trying to maintain itself against genuine revisions). To recall another famous quote about how progress has to be made in science, progress here too may also have to proceed “funeral by funeral”.

References

- Cunningham, W. & Mehaffy, M. (2013). Wiki as Pattern Language. *Proceedings/CVPR, IEEE Computer Society Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition*, 2013, 1, 32-47, October 2013.
- La Giorgia, G. (2007). Market v. Meaning. *Architecture Week*, 1 August 2007.
- Mehaffy, M.W. (2016). The UN’s New Urban Agenda Is Official... Now What? *Meeting of the Minds*, 7 December 2016.
- Mehaffy, M.W. (2019). Assessing Alexander’s Later Contributions to a Science of Cities. *Urban Science*, 3(2), 59.

Received: 10 October 2019;
Accepted: 22 December 2019.
Published: 30 December 2019.