

leader

The whole and the parts

Ove Arup's paper on the education of architects (p. 38) was written just two years after the events of '68. In Paris, where architecture students helped rip up the streets, the last vestiges of the Beaux Arts system collapsed, while in New Haven, where Paul Rudolph's Yale architecture school was set on fire, advocacy planning took over. When they returned to the studios and lecture rooms it was, to quote Arup, 'sociology and the rest' that the students wanted to learn about.

Today's students are deeply conscious of the ills of society – but sociology hardly features on their list of priorities. New enthusiasms – poetics, materiality and prosthetic machines – have emerged.

And what was the nature of the architectural profession that Arup was addressing? In the United Kingdom, the vast majority of architects were directly employed by central and local government and many were not above 'telling the State how to run its business'. But Arup, like so many perceptive engineering consultants before and since, was all too familiar with their shortcomings and it was this which, in his opinion, diminished the architect's social and economic authority.

Architects no longer tell the State what to do. Not because there is not much to say – about our cities, transport and housing – but because the State no longer listens (at least in the UK). Perhaps, too, architects have become wise enough to realise that it is the role of the profession not to dictate solutions but to show society the range of possibilities.

There is much to learn from the paper which Arup so carefully drafted for a meeting which he couldn't attend, organised by a profession of which he was not even an honorary member. His insistence on 'the interdependence of the various part-designs'; on the significance of 'the architect's job as essentially the spatial organisation'; and the need to give everybody 'an understanding of the total picture' are all incontestable. But his proposition that 'the excellence of the whole ... is nearly always the result of compromise, for you can't have everything' needs examination.

In one sense, Arup was right but, in another, that view was surprisingly negative. A great piece of architecture (as opposed to architectural design) does not involve compromise: right from the start, it takes into account

the imperatives – philosophical, practical and economic – of the whole situation. ‘Excitement’ in design comes not from exclusion but through creative inclusion: the complexity of any situation is an opportunity for invention.

Too many students graduate from architecture school seeing the world as a threat rather than an opportunity. They either resort to a blinkered insistence on My Art – and produce bad buildings – or they give in to the inevitable and go for the lowest common denominator in design. Both results are deadly.

Which brings us back to the schools. Professionally experienced teachers are essential not so much because specific constructional or technical information needs to be taught but because judgement about the relative importance of different aspects of design must be present. This can only be taught as a result of recent experience of the ever changing ways in which buildings get built in our society.

Young architects and teachers whose lives have been spent on research or utopian design are important ingredients in any school but they can, through inexperience or even fear, imply that pure design is an activity which must be protected from the real world. This is unacceptable. There must be a dialogue. Different approaches should support each other and recognise each others’ strengths.

Digging deep into a particular issue or ‘theme’ can be an immensely profitable learning experience. But the part can only be a fragment of the whole: students – and teachers – should always step back from the close focus and consider where their investigations lie in relation to other issues. In Arup’s words, ‘the ingredients must be combined in the right way and in the right proportions’.

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