

The writing on the wall

Andres Duany's essay 'Ad majorem gloria me: order out of the chaos of architectural education' (Perspective 1, p. 105) will evoke both wry smiles and cries of outrage. Although written with the North American scene in mind it refers to a fairly widespread phenomenon – the grooming of architecture students 'for the position of Next Mediated Genius ... or bust'. It is by no means a universal condition even in North America but it is common enough to cause considerable concern on the part of those who want both a strong profession and better buildings and places – the subject of Robert Gutman's 'Critical issues for architectural practice' (Perspective 2, p. 107).

In his critique, Gutman reviews the first two publications sponsored by RIBA Future Studies – an admirable venture set up two years ago to stimulate radical thinking on strategic architectural issues. He is critical of both publications, feeling that they do not address the crucial issues facing architectural practice. In particular, he takes issue with the emphasis on 'flagship buildings', questioning their often unimpressive long-term performance. Such a focus on monuments like Gehry's Bilbao and Foster's Reichstag tends to inhibit debate on other, more prosaic but common buildings.

The subject matter of the first of our two Design pieces, Hans van der Heijden's 'The diagram of the house' (p. 110) is of far greater relevance to society than any flagship building. The author and his colleagues at BIQ Architecten seem a million miles away from many of their better publicised peers in the Netherlands. Working on the renovation of problematic post-war housing estates and on the creation of new housing communities on both almost featureless sites and in well established urban areas, they collaborate closely with contractors and, in their designs, embrace the ordinary. This is not 'fashionable' work, but it is immensely impressive for its integrity, its spatial control and its low-key innovation.

Now take a look at Paolo Tombesi's paper 'A true south for design? The new international division of labour in architecture' in the Practice section (p. 171). Pointing to the sharp wage differentials between architects in the developed and developing regions, he suggests that, in a few years, most architectural work will be documented in places such as South-East Asia. Where does this leave the many thousands of young people – Duany's Next Mediated Geniuses – undergoing architectural education in the more privileged parts of the world? And what are the implications for professional institutes obsessed by flagship buildings?

The time has surely come for a more modest and vastly more intelligent approach to architectural education and the needs of society in the developed world.

THE EDITORS

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