

Look – No Students! :: A Future For Architectural Education

John McKean suggests the total abandonment of architectural education as it exists today, and the creation of Centres for Architectural Enquiry in place of our Schools of Architecture.

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Asking radical questions about architectural education is a habit which most of us involved in schools of architecture tend to grow out of pretty quickly. Of course everyone feels trapped by millions of threads, individually tenuous and fragile perhaps, but together totally binding; binding to CNAA regulations or to university Court, to prejudices about education, professional roles and their boundaries; about teaching, competition, and assessment; about the RIBA's own role; in fact about ideology. So any fresh impetus is nigh miraculous.

But for a moment, let us forget these loaded, if usually unstated, positions and the context of today's schools of architecture. Imagine instead of a sausage factory with willing young recruits who emerge as B.A., B.Sc., B.Arch., Dip.Arch., Reg.Arch., RIBA, the possibility of an alternative: let us call it a Centre for Architectural Enquiry.

Here there are no students. It runs no 'School of Architecture', but its *raison d'être* is architectural education. To be involved, to join any of the wide range of courses, to be employed as technician or typist, to be part-time tutor or Specialist consultant, one takes out membership of the Centre. Here is the first breath of fresh air; its patrons are people, of the same genus as its staff.

The Centre runs a myriad series of courses, usually short, each highly structured and each financially accountable (usually financing itself from fees which may be grant-aided to the individual, from central and local government, from industrial or research grants linked to the course).

The courses are open only to members – and where the participant is not grant-aided, it is likely to be tax-deductible, no doubt. Just as with other similar establishments, all members participating in a course are otherwise employed (or at least employable). This introduces the second waft of fresh air, when time, money and motivation are linked in a comprehensible pattern. Minds are concentrated wonderfully.

That may sound aggressive, but it need not be; its actual ramifications depending on the precise courses and the way they are handled. Certainly there will be no pressure to skimp, rush or neglect personal tuition. While the other side of this simple social contract is that participants will also expect a course as competent, coherent and well-organised as they might expect anywhere else. So tutors' minds, too, are concentrated wonderfully.

The form of courses will, of course, reflect their content. Some may be one full week from 09.00 to 21.00 hrs., others an evening a week for six months, and others any possible combination of hours. The Centre has no prejudice against intensive sessions, nor the considerable values of a system where individuals on a course

make appointments to see their tutor every few months, pacing themselves, and 'paying' for individual consultations. The form of anyone's personal education is therefore under that member's control. The next breath of fresh air is let into the education hothouse. In this brief essay which is exploring form, I want to play down content, since one key criterion for the form is its ability to take any desired content. However, obviously all the normal 'input' of a school of architecture (which, despite the name, really is a school for architects) could be there, if inevitably with rather richer results.

The Centre for Architectural Enquiry has no rigid position on educational questions, such as 'earning' versus 'teaching.' But inevitably it is informed by the obvious notion that any skilled technique is most likely to be appreciated and understood by real practice, and that the best mentor is an equal whose skill the learner recognises and values. It has no rigid position on professional roles. But inevitably its services will respond to real needs which recognise the qualities of the centre.

Funding for The Centre is canvassed from central and local government (for the latter it is clearly a direct service), and from all other bodies connected with architectural enquiry. Funding for individuals on courses is canvassed from local education authorities (LEAs) and other grant-aiding bodies.

Membership of the Centre is canvassed from all those interested in the exchange of architectural ideas and knowledge. The centre takes on, at a local and direct level, those Charter principles (the advancement of architecture) which the RIBA might seem to neglect.

There is no membership qualification, but local membership is quite expensive, more distant membership is cheap, and, for members who work in architecture but have no qualifications, very cheap indeed.

Set groups of courses collect credits. The Centre has negotiated that certain combinations of credits receive certain exemptions from the exams of-existing bodies in the field; so there is no question of neglecting the real intentions and aspirations of prospective members of existing institutions. By gaining credits in the recognised groups of courses, members can work towards HNC, say, or to membership of ARB, IOB, RICS or whatever. Other overlapping sets of course credits, perhaps less vocational but to a rigorous academic standard, lead to properly validated B.Sc. and B.A. degrees or are even linked to the Open University credit system. DES, SED and LEAs agree to award fees to participants who are registered on course sets which" lead to professional qualifications or academic degrees.

Our Centre may sponsor a sabbatical study year for anyone who has been working and studying for seven years. For those who have gained their professional qualifications this way, the education authorities award the equivalent of a full-time student grant for a year.

The Centre itself, is more than the sum of these courses. It is an Architecture Centre which people join because they get a buzz out of architecture. Its great advantage over short course institutes or, say, the Open University, is that it is a physical centre in a real place; its courses must cater for the needs of the community. A rich mix of highly structured courses and open lectures, exhibitions and shows, will allow the interstices to fill out with that essential, unstructured

part of education which uses bar and members' common-rooms as its base. Ready acknowledgement of this opens another window for fresh air.

So there it is, sketched hastily in rough. Now, what have we left behind?

One, we abandon entry qualifications. Such an extravagant farce at the moment, when so many sit so seriously making such portentous pronouncements about the future for so few.

Our Centre substitutes a careful and well-manned counselling service, advising members about courses and responsive to their comments on them. (Each member registered on a path leading to ARCUK registration has, by mutual consent, another member, a registered architect, as personal tutor. Each member working towards an academic degree has an academic member as personal tutor, who is less likely to be based in architectural practice.)

Two, we abandon unproductive pseudo-educational arguments, such as the totally pointless 'chicken and egg' lunacy that, as the argument (and various undergraduate courses around) puts it, 'you' have to cram as much as you can into 'them' before 'you' can get anything of value out of 'them'.

Three, we abandon the amazingly wasteful misuse of facilities during term time, and the scandal of their being locked up for a third of the year.

Four, we abandon the nonsense that an educational institute can produce people proficient in complex social and technical skills which they have not practised; there is no pretence at 'playing little architects'. The processes of design learning is continually re-examined, and group design exercises and gaming techniques are certainly not ruled out.

Five, we abandon the log-book, and much practical training nonsense. Of course ARB may want a standard of professional competence by which to judge potential members, and that can now take a more sensible form, without pressure from educational institutions.

Six, we abandon the five year time-hoop; the question of time to qualification becomes within personal control, the age or marital status of a student becomes irrelevant.

Fundamentally, we abandon students. We have no racial segregation into full-time, part-time, vocational, dilettante, or evening-classes of human. The student (as defined today) is dead. Long live the student! (in each of us).

This last gush of fresh air clears all the rest of the cobwebs, dissolving, for example, the recent cries for a smaller profession.

Ironically, while my system is obviously self-adjusting, and indeed may result in fewer ARB registrations, it also has potential for greatly widening the scope of architectural enquiry within its local community and then, perhaps, increasing the architect's role here.

Instead of a professional enclave, our Centre, now an enabling body for a wide variety of learning needs, is a conspiracy with the laity, against the drab and restricting, monotonous and tasteless, harmful and dehumanising environment

which otherwise tends to overwhelm the land and to deaden our senses. It is a community resource without any whiff of heavy-handed do-gooding. It is a supple, and potentially subtle, framework for a more positive future.

Notes:

1. Brief hints in this direction (eg calling for School of Architecture rather than School for architects) were made in my Week by Week note in *Building Design*, 18 June 1976.
2. Certain ideas here were slightly further elaborated in my note *Spectacular no-student model* written at the request of AA Forum in January 1977. Resemblance between certain ideas here and the Architectural Association is not coincidental.
3. The text is unchanged from that published in *The Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* in May 1979, except that, to make it comprehensible today, ARCUK has been replaced by ARB.