

## **Human Rights in Architectural Education**

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Abstract:

*The architectural profession continues to focus on aspects of design that result in a greater distance from the broader issues of development and social exclusion. The institutions representing the profession, and in particular, the architecture schools have an obligation to address these problems. This paper suggests an alternative approach to the architecture curriculum centred on a human rights-based approach to the practice of the profession.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

There are many pressures on the curriculum of architecture schools. The profession has expectations of graduates that are rarely met. Graduates, in turn, have expectations of the profession that are often dashed on the jagged rocks of practice. Both make demands on the curriculum to meet future expectations.

One of the reasons these expectations are frustrated, I believe, is that there are competing definitions of what it is that architects do and, worse, there are competing prognostications about the future of the profession. With the latter, schools of architecture have a particular responsibility in that they are educating and training future architects for a profession that will undoubtedly change quickly. For example, 40 years ago there were few, if any, architecture curricula with courses dealing in any but the most cursory way with environmental issues. Now, the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) in the United States – one of the key institutions governing accreditation of architecture schools and their curricula – includes ‘sustainability’ as one of the student performance criteria. This expands on their earlier criterion, ‘environmental conservation’ in the 1998 version to now include carbon-neutral design and

bioclimatic design in the 2009 version. What else might we expect? How should the architecture curriculum prepare for an unknown future? This paper is an attempt to suggest some prognostications and their implications for the architecture curriculum.

It is the contention of this paper that the current curriculum comes out of a long history of the profession and how it has defined and redefined itself. That definition of the practice of architecture is inadequate to deal with the global problems with which we are now presented. Those global issues have profound implications on the practice of architecture and, consequently, on the curriculum of architecture schools. While many of the traditional skills outlined in the NAAB 'Conditions for Accreditation'<sup>1</sup> will not change there should be a revised emphasis within those criteria to be able to overcome the limits of the history of the profession.

## 2. HISTORY

Architects and their representative associations around the world continue to fret about their diminishing role in the development of the built environment or, to put it more positively, to ask how architects can do more than they currently are doing. I would like to suggest here that this question has been pondered for some time now, that it is motivated by a number of conditions or perceptions which, in turn, define the current profession

These are old concerns that have, I believe, a common source – Alberti's book, *On the Art of Building*. In the fifteenth century, with the revival of Vitruvius and the new writings of Alberti, the empirical approach of the medieval master builder was abandoned in favour of the architect again becoming the director of design. He shifted away from a direct involvement in the building trades. This separation was deepened by "the introduction of a novel set of forms, based on the Classical remains" (Ettliger, 1977:121). The master mason was familiar with a more traditional architectural language that arose out of patterns developed from many

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<sup>1</sup> Like the 'RIBA Principles & Procedures for the Validation of International Courses and Examinations in Architecture', the NAAB outlines, among other standards, the knowledge and skills students are required to have upon graduation. See [http://www.naab.org/accreditation/2009\\_Conditions.aspx](http://www.naab.org/accreditation/2009_Conditions.aspx)

generations of experience in the field. Without the recourse to these traditional patterns, he was necessarily left to follow the instructions of the architect.

For Alberti this was as it should be. Architecture was separated from the crafts and "the architect was an artist whose activity had nothing to do with that of a craftsman." (Wilkinson, 1977:125)

His book *On the Art of Building*, is quite explicit on this distinction:

". . . the carpenter is but an instrument in the hands of the architect. Him I consider the architect, who by sure and wonderful reason and method, knows both how to devise through his own mind and energy, and to realize by construction, whatever can be most beautifully fitted out for the noble needs of man . . ." (Alberti, [1988]:3)

From this deliberate split accusations arose that the architect was no longer trained in technique and therefore was nothing more than a dilettante. This is a now familiar argument between the profession and the building trades, each accusing the other of incompetence, either in understanding theory or in building practice. Out of that misguided distinction, the architect continued to distance himself from the site and from trades people. In the space between there was plenty of room for others to enter. By the Industrial Revolution competition was getting quite fierce.

Architects were faced with mounting competition from entrepreneurial 'design-build' firms. Facing competition, as he was, from "engineers, surveyors, cabinetmakers and even house agents" (Saint, 1983:60), the architect needed to establish a distinct identity and improve his social status and separate himself from the herd. To that end, in 1791 the Architects' Club was established in Britain. With a membership limited to members of the Royal Academy of Arts (formed in 1768) and selected others, the discussions of this exclusive dinner club included professional qualifications and fees (Wilton-Ely, 1977:192) - topics that today continue to occupy the interests of professional institutes. In 1834 the Institute of British Architects was founded with a mandate to facilitate "the acquirement of architectural knowledge, for the promotion of the different branches of science connected with it, and for establishing an uniformity and respectability of the practice of the profession." (Wilton-Ely, 1977:193). The same incentive that drove Alberti to seek a stronger differentiation between the architect and the

craftsmen on the site was now motivating British architects to seek respectability in professionalization.

Aside from the promotion of architectural knowledge, two issues consumed the interest of the Institute in these early years - the relationship between the architect and the building industry (particularly, one would assume, the design-build companies) and, related to that, professional self-defence. With all these other parties involved in the construction industry staking a claim for the built environment, the architect was left with Alberti's increasingly confining claim to 'art' as his domain of expertise. The territory for which Alberti argued was now being thrust upon the profession as the only remaining territory in the built environment over which the architect could lay claim. Art, as a means of self-defence, did not leave the new professional with a strong argument against the shifting divisions of labour that developed out of the Industrial Revolution. These changes in the labour force were, in part, a result of the population explosion in Britain that took place between 1800 and 1830. Urbanization and the increase of population from 9 to 14 million in the space of those thirty years, created a need for housing that called for "far larger speculative ventures in urban development than had been connected with the leisurely evolution of Georgian London, Bath, or Edinburgh." (Wilton-Ely, 1977:193) With this need, the nature of the construction process had to change. The master-craftsman, working on piece-work, was replaced by the general contractor with a team of craftsmen who would bid competitively for a job on a lump sum basis. With this, there was further reason for the architect's role to shift away from the site to the drawing board. Drawings became the medium of the legal contract between parties - the general contractor, the client, and the architect. The drawings and specifications as legal documents were reinforced by the declining "skill and initiative among the building crafts through general contracting." (Wilton-Ely, 1977:194) The client now needed some protection in the course of a contract that would assure him of getting what he asked for. The growing reliance on drawings and the technique of architecture widened a rift between the professional architect and the 'artist' architect. The approach of the former gave the client better protection from unscrupulous or unskilled builders, while the latter could provide the client with only the ineffable.

The fragmentation that began with Alberti was exacerbated by the registration of professional architects. The intention, however, was similar - the establishment and public recognition of an elite that would act as arbiters of taste (another word that created considerable annoyance in the Arts and Crafts Movement). The other intention was, with the recognition of this status by society, to further entrench the position of architects against an increasing array of design and building services. To this end, the RIBA began to lobby for registration in 1890. Registration legislation was delayed until 1931 but by the turn of the century the fight for registration was all but over. The problems of the profession, however, were not. If architects were to be registered by a legislative act of the State, there would be implications on the training of architects and on the defining role of the architect. Legislation finally formalized in the public's perception, the fundamental questions that arose with the Industrial Revolution: what is it in the training of the architect or in the practice of architecture that differentiates it from the engineer, the professional builders, or even cabinet makers? Further, what obligations to society arise for the profession as a result of that legislation? Is that training well suited to address the global problems now facing society?

### **3. GLOBAL ISSUES**

Amidst the immediate issues of war and nuclear disaster, I would like to outline a few important facts that should make architects and planners sit up and take notice:

- Urbanization of the planet now stands at about 50% of the population. Urbanization is not about to stop. (UNCHS, 2003)
- A second and related fact is that one-sixth of the planet's population currently lives in slums. It is estimated that if nothing is done that population will double in the next 25 years. (UNCHS, 2003)
- There is a growing gap between the rich and the poor. The gap in income between top executives and the average employee has widened significantly (ILO, 2008). The poorest quintile of population consumes about 1.5% of the world's resources while the top quintile consumes about 77% (World Bank, 2008)

- Climate Change – related to poverty and the access to resources (particularly energy) is the effect of development on climate change.
- Access to energy resources – income inequality and the gap between rich and poor is related directly to access to energy and the growing scarcity of non-renewables. The problem of access to non-renewables has now led the European Commission to “[h]alve the use of ‘conventionally-fuelled’ cars in urban transport by 2030; phase them out in cities by 2050; achieve essentially CO2-free city logistics in major urban centres by 2030” (EC, 2011:10).

These facts and the projections from them will have a profound effect on our cities. The first two facts, rapid urbanization, mainly by the poor, and the doubling of slums to accommodate this population growth means that our cities will be designed, in effect, by the poor unless we prepare architects and planners to meet the challenges of poverty and human habitat in a way that they have not as yet. The last three facts are far more fundamental since they have a pervasive effect on:

- Sustainability – the ability of a society to reduce the degradation of the environment
- Security – widening gaps between rich and poor can lead to political and social unrest, as well as rising crime.
- Health – note the rising incidence of tuberculosis and the pervasive effects of AIDS on the economic development of many nations in Africa and the effect it has on education with a growing shortage of teachers as a result of AIDS<sup>2</sup> and the loss of students who must leave school to care for ailing parents.
- Development – where there is political/social instability, a degraded environment, a workforce that is depleted from ill health and poorly trained from lack of education, there is not likely to be much investment or any development. Clearly this affects architecture.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Lewis reported that in 2001 alone, one million children lost their teachers to AIDS. See <http://www.g6bpeoplesummit.org>, Stephen Lewis ‘Keynote Address’, People’s Summit, 21 June 02, Calgary Alberta.

Given the history of the profession and its current limiting definition of itself, are future graduates prepared to address these global issues effectively? What are some of the implications on the practice of architecture and, with that, the direction of the curriculum for architecture schools?

#### **4. IMPLICATIONS**

There are some basic rights that must be considered here. One is the right to be recognized, I would say, as a citizen – the right to be included. Of course, the right to participate in development implies that, but I believe it must be understood that participation will never start without recognition. Slum communities are typically defined out of existence (Bristol, 2010). Under those circumstance, while the city administration and the consulting architects who do the planning may have an intellectual understanding of the right of citizens to participate in development, if those citizens are not recognized or are defined out of the process, even token participation is not about to happen.

As important as development is to the improvement of the human condition, there are principles within which development must happen. As part of that development industry architects must be concerned about those limits on development and the principles that set those limits. Along with an understanding of the UN documents such as the Declaration on the Right to Development, I think there are some other basic principles we should consider:

- the right to recognition – to participate, those in power first have to recognize the existence of those who can participate.
- the right to be included – some – those well-placed few – will profit from development and as often as not the poor are not only excluded from it, they pay the price for development

As I see it, these are simply basic principles of democracy, of a broad concept of citizenship and, necessarily, architects and the development industry as a whole, will either support or obstruct these fundamental principles through their actions. While we might be hard-pressed to find an architect who would express objections to the concepts of democracy and citizenship, we

certainly find architects, engineers, and planners – development decision-makers – who, through their actions, actually do subvert these concepts, partly by setting other priorities and partly by a lack of knowledge of the relationship between their actions and these concepts.

Beyond, then, these basic principles of recognition and inclusion, the development industry must include in its programmatic parameters the support of the broad principles of democracy and citizenship. What would that entail?

There are three key issues that should be considered: participation, organization, and human rights.

1. Participation – Since the mid-sixties individuals and communities have been expanding their demands for more involvement in the development affecting them. As discussed above, while this is also a political issue about democracy and the responsibilities of citizenship, here I want to emphasize that it is also psychosocial issue of autonomy. In part this is about the exercise of control over one's environment and as such about empowerment and the way that communities define themselves.

*Implications for architecture:* Urban development in the West has become virtually impossible without evidence of the participation of affected communities. Further, as Stiglitz points out, “broadly participatory processes (such as ‘voice’, openness, and transparency) promote truly successful long-term development.” (Stiglitz, 2002:164)

Participation emphasizes process over outcomes (product). As a result conflicts can arise between the requirements of that process and the formal intentions of the architect.

Architects, in other words, have been trained to emphasize the product over the process. In doing this they effectively marginalize the profession from these central issues of rights and democracy.

2. Organization – there is a move from hierarchies to networks. As such the pyramid of hierarchical organizations is getting flatter. This affects both information and structures of organizations. Information moves too slowly (if at all) through to the top of hierarchical organizations and the response to rapidly changing circumstances is equally slow. “In those flatter, more network-like organizations, people won’t be merely information transmitters – they will be empowered assets, acting independently.” (Rischard, 2002:43) An example of the inefficiencies of hierarchies would be the centrally planned economies of the former Soviet Union.

*Implications for architecture:* This also has implications on city planning. It must become more dynamic and responsive to the multiplicity of needs from a wide variety of actors. “[I]n most cases it would be a waste of resources to put forward a masterplan. This is certainly the case where rapid urbanization is taking place . . . The days of the ‘Masterplan’ hanging on the wall behind the desk of the proud Mayor or Governor must be numbered.” (Rowland, 1996:78) The city can no more be centrally planned than an economy. Both the marketplace and the city are too dynamic, layered and nuanced for that.

3. Human Rights – Along with participation, there are two other broad issues concerning human rights and its relationship to architecture and development: the post-WWII expansion of rights and, the move by the UN and other agencies towards a human rights based approach to development.

Since the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the understanding and the observance of human rights has been expanding steadily to the point that it now sets (and externalizes) the standard for the behaviour of states towards their citizens.

*Implications for architecture:* The UN Right to Development calls for “free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom”

(Article 2.3<sup>3</sup>). Since architects and planners are directly involved in ‘development’ they have a responsibility to devise processes that allow for that meaningful participation and fair distribution. This will require much greater attention to distributive justice and/or protection of the poor in society.

## 5. CURRICULUM RESPONSES

This is not a call for the complete overhaul of the architecture curriculum but rather a shift in emphasis. David Orr pointed out some years ago that ‘all education is environmental education’ (Orr, 1991). While I agree with that global statement I would like to add to it: ‘All education is human rights education’. A human rights-based approach (HRBA)<sup>4</sup> to architecture must be just as much a part of the curriculum and practice as are environmental issues. In the current NAAB criteria, for example, that would entail a shift in emphasis rather than an addition to a list that is already quite lengthy. There are now 32 requirements in the NAAB ‘Student Performance Criteria’. They have consolidated this from the 1998 list which had 37 requirements.

Understanding a rights-based approach to architecture would be included under ‘C7-Legal Responsibilities’, ‘C8-Ethics and Professional Judgment’, and ‘C9-Community and Social Responsibility’. In addition to that, following Orr’s point, it should be included in the understanding of all the other criteria in each of the three realms

I propose, then, a curriculum which is meant to address some of these global issues of inequity by preparing architecture students through community design. Centred, as always, around the studio, this program would provide an alternative to the traditional program by engaging students in vulnerable communities in their region. There are a number of issues that such a program must address while meeting the basic requirements of accreditation:

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<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/>

<sup>4</sup> In Human Rights-based Approach (HRBA) duty-bearers have “positive obligations to protect, promote and fulfil human rights, as well as negative obligations to abstain from rights violations. In addition to governments, a wide range of other actors should also carry responsibilities for the realization of human rights, including individuals, local organizations and authorities, the private sector, the media, donors, development partners and international institutions.” (UNICEF, 2007:11) Architects, with their legislated obligations to society, are primarily duty-bearers.

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- Urbanization and poverty; the growth of slums – a critical issue in African and Asian cities, affecting the shape of cities, the development process, security, rights, and freedoms
- Participation in development – development as a democratic process supporting autonomy; equitable development
- Flattened/horizontal organizational structures (networks) – interdisciplinary with an emphasis on defining problems first
- Human rights – including the access to education; the democratization of knowledge
- Social responsibility and with that, a clear understanding of the nature of citizenship
- Responsive to community issues/needs – as a form of advocacy
- International standards – in order to assure reliability but also to allow graduates the freedom of movement (trade in services)
- Practice – the architecture school is in an ideal position to lead the profession in its redefinition, but only if there is a clear and supportive connection between them. This applies as well to the construction industry as a whole.
- Sustainability – to better understand the implications of sustainability beyond the ‘greening’ of buildings and the conservation of energy; environmental responsibility
- Linkage – to improve the links and partnerships between all parties in the development process – communities, CBOs/NGOs, private sector, government, professionals, and educational institutions.
- To better respond to the implications of globalization, particularly as it concerns the maintenance of standards, the erosion of cultures, and common cause.

Clearly, accomplishing this while also meeting the current national and international accreditation requirements will be a difficult proposition. However, the idea of developing an architecture program with a focus on community development is hardly a new one. Beginning in the early 60s with the formation by architecture students of ARCH in Harlem and with the Pratt Institute<sup>5</sup> and a more formalized relationship between an educational institution and local communities, there is a long-standing tradition throughout the world of educational institutions,

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.picced.org/lowres/index.html>

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their students and faculty taking responsibility for applying their knowledge and expertise to basic needs in communities. This work has taken a number of forms in different countries including Community Design Centers (CDCs)<sup>6</sup> and the Rural Studio<sup>7</sup> in the United States and my own studio at the School of Architecture and Design at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi<sup>8</sup>.

This can be expanded into an international programme. In addition to the basic goals outlined above, and in order to reinforce them, the program must also promote:

- Combining theory with practice at regular intervals
- A continuum of education from children to paraprofessionals to graduate architects to continuing education for practicing professionals
- alternation between teaching and learning for all participants.

The following chart presents an outline of the proposed programs and their relationships to each other. Following that is a description of each of the elements.

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.communitydesign.org/About.htm> for information about CDCs

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.cadc.auburn.edu/rural-studio/> for background on this program in the Architecture School of Auburn University.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Bristol (2010)



theory crosses over into practice, the ‘community project’ during the break between first and second year, and the ‘kids and architecture’ program during the break between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year. Community Project – In the break between first and second year students are to build a project on which they have collectively worked during the second semester of 1<sup>st</sup> year. The project must have some lasting value to the city/selected community and it must be small enough and simple enough to be built by the students under supervision. The choice of project will necessarily involve consultation with the city and host community.

*Graduate Program* – This is the professional degree program ending in an M. Arch degree that would meet all of the requirements to be recognized by existing accreditation bodies. Without describing the entire curriculum, there are a few key features that should be outlined – the ‘work program’, the 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> semester studio, the ‘field study’ and ‘office practice’.

When candidates have qualified for entry by either an acceptable undergraduate degree in a related field or by successfully completing their qualifying year, they first must enter the ‘Work Program’ before starting their first semester in September.

Work Program – Under the supervision of students in their 3<sup>rd</sup> semester of the Master’s Program, entering students would work from April to August on construction projects in selected communities. Entering students not only gain valuable experience in construction but also, in working with members of the community, a much better understanding of the resources they have to offer.

2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> Semester Studio – The Community Workshop studio joins students with communities in identifying projects within the community. Often these are infrastructure projects improving pathways, water supply, fire safety, and so on, but they can just as easily extend to, for example, the development of a community health clinic, a daycare centre, or a recycling centre. Through a series of participatory exercises in the community the projects are identified and then designed. The implementation of these projects would depend on funding sources; however, the final report from the studio will outline the projects that the incoming students in the ‘work program’

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would undertake. The report is finished in April and a 3<sup>rd</sup> semester course would be in the supervision of the construction by the incoming students.

Field Study – Ideally this would be an exchange program between students in the region. For students of this program, though, they would take the experience from their Community Workshop studio to another country and work with students there on a joint project.

Office Practice – This would be a two-semester program that would place students with one of the listed ‘participants in development’. They would be under the supervision of a practicing architect. During this 2 semester practicum, students would also be doing background research on their thesis.

## 6. CONCLUSION

It is critical, both ethically and practically, for the profession to take a much stronger role in the fundamental social issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In order to do that appropriately graduates must understand the fundamentals of a human rights-based approach to their professional practice. This can be done without appreciably changing the basic requirements for accreditation but it certainly will change the focus from the Alberti-based concept of architecture to a concept of the Citizen Architect. The film of the same name opens with a statement from Peanut Robinson a resident of Hale County Alabama: “And architects design building for who? For the wealthy people.” That dominant perception needs to change if the future is to be met with any confidence and relevance by our profession.

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