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by John Parman

“Who knows better than us what we want?” This question, posed by Horst Rittel in the introductory planning course I took at Berkeley CED in the early 1970s, caught the spirit of disregard if not hostility to expertise prevailing then. Architects weren’t immune.

Architects traditionally based their claims to expertise on experience. An interest in methods is another historical leitmotif, initially expressed through handbooks of rules and orders, and later updated as “design methods.” As Rittel argued in the late 1960s, methods are of limited value—useful in solving the “tame” problems of logistics and engineering, but useless for the “wicked” ones. These Rittel defined as open-ended, impossible to define adequately, and caught up in a layered problem space in which the “solution” invariably fails to account for its possible causes and consequences.

“Evidence-based design” is the latest architecture-as-expertise gambit. Casting its rearview mirror on the built environment, it derives findings that are then applied to new work in the belief that the choices made are justified by their precedents. This is architecture as case law, in essence, with a sociological, behavioral-psych overlay. In theory, the experts—armed with their evidence—will prevail over the value engineers. In reality, it turns that game into a dialogue among quants, with quality sidelined or else forced to argue—like a high-priced courtesan—for her elevated indices of pleasure.

The disenchantment with expertise, then and now, reflects the sense that the larger process—architecture’s permanent context and condition—is broken, that its outcomes remain arbitrary, with the experts as window dressing, skills, guarantors of very little.

The half-life of expertise

Still schooled for a Newtonian universe, architects are often blind to the quantum nature of the field. Apparently solid practices can vaporize, and generations of architects are left to fend for themselves. In every boom, holes where talent should be reflect episodic disruption. This is why architectural education is best thought of as gaining a critical sense about one's work, learning how to get things done, and, with luck, understanding how time—managed or squandered—affects the work.

It's no accident that algorithms are replacing human experts as anticipators of our next moves. But this is the territory of *Zeitgeist*, fodder for forecasts but predictive only a very short distance. There's plenty of ephemeral work in the architectural repertoire, but what endures syncs to a different clock—Stewart Brand's "long now." Here, the *Zeitgeist* is of limited use and one has to bet on future "unknown-unknowns," Nassim Taleb's "black swans" that reveal the limits of human knowledge and foresight.

Any expertise that architecture uses has to unfold with it. Every specialty in the field has a half-life of utility that seems to shorten with each season, reflecting revolutions in technique and making. There are exceptions—counterrevolutions also occur, especially around craft: the bespoke part of architecture lives in a Veblen world of craft fetishism. Even here, though, fashions change. The risk is to be left behind, bereft of occasions.

The Tao of expertise

A career trajectory in any field ideally reveals both what resonates and one's true calling or *métier*. Expertise is in this sense a marriage of depth with efficacy, conscious of time. As such, it frees itself from an absolute dependence on technique, regarding it properly as means not ends. Expertise in technique is dangerous, because of its temporary utility to others. One becomes their means, which is rarely an end in itself. Expertise is value in a broader sense, within processes that depend on the teamwork of very strong players.

With every downturn, architecture firms shed from their ranks anyone who's dispensable. The more thoughtful also remove people who they doubt can lead them into the future. Relative skill is one issue, but the failure to grow is far more problematic. Those who thrive in a field constantly push to do more with it. They don't see themselves as experts, because they're always moving into unknown territory. That others recognize what they know is beyond question.

By "conscious of time," I mean aware of how time sharpens what consumes us. There are aspects of life that we take up, put down, take up again. Others demand constant engagement. Yet we are ourselves, absorbing experience

in every quarter. One of the lessons of Zen is not to privilege one thing over another—being the cook, as Dōgen noted, is a shortcut to enlightenment if taken seriously. This is true of everything.

This is important to remember in a field still caught up in a male-dominated, master-and-apprentice mindset, still too willing to substitute self-abnegation for real thinking about how to organize work and practice intelligently. That architecture is less toxic than some other professions doesn't excuse its toxicity. The working world in general in late capitalism is caught between its need for flatness and fluidity, and its unwillingness to abandon command and control or to tailor work to work with life. I heard Larry Leifer, founder of Stanford's Center for Design Research, say that, "in a flat organization, the smartest person in the room changes whenever the subject changes." Architecture needs that openness, too, but it's still rare in my experience.

Expertise isn't captured in diplomas or certificates or the 10,000 hours that Malcolm Gladwell asserted are its prerequisite. These have their place, but expertise is harder to pin down. Yet it becomes clearer as people age and we see them in the full richness of their experience. The architectural historian Pierluigi Serraino described interviewing Mario Ciampi late in his life, brimming over with ideas for new work. "Work as if immortal," Morgan Forster said. It's that Tao of expertise again: learning to be.

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