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Title

The General from the Local

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4134j4b7>

Journal

Places, 1(4)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1984-04-01

Peer reviewed

The General from the Local

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The following text is a reedited version of the author's keynote address for the 8th International Forum of the European Association for Architectural Education, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, April 13, 1983.

There used to be a time, not so long ago, when students from developing countries were admitted to western European and North American schools to learn things the western way. Both teachers and students were convinced that this was a good thing to do: developing countries could best develop by applying the western ways. There was no alternative.

We have lost that innocence. On both sides we know now that the issues are much more complex. It is not just a question of transfer of knowledge, skills, and technology from one place where there is plenty to another where more is needed.

In developing countries westernization is seen as a mixed blessing at best. Among the younger generations there is a renewed interest in their cultural heritage. They see how local customs and forms disappear rapidly to make place for an image of western affluence, well-being, and power that stands for the state of "being developed." Others in the western world share their concern. Is there a way, we have come to ask, to be developed and yet not westernized?

At the same time architects from developed countries have become involved. Professional expertise has gone international and much of it has to do with the Third World. Consultants of all kinds come with government aid programs, with commercial projects, and at the request of local authorities. In such contacts clarity and simplicity are sometimes lost. The dilemmas of the Third World architect who

returned to his country after a western education are now shared by many of his colleagues in Europe and the United States.

It is, however, not only in Third World relationships that the western architects and architectural educators question their responsibilities and their role. Within the context of the western European tradition itself questions are raised as well.

Indeed, one could, with a little effort, advance a plausible argument that we have no business to educate people from other cultures, that we had better first deal with our own problems. I am opposed to that idea of retrenchment for reasons that I will explain, but you may agree with me that we are far removed from the happy times when we felt that we had something indispensable to offer to those who had the misfortune to be born in another part of the world.

Of course architectural education in the West cannot ignore the Third World. There are many good reasons of political, economical, ethical, and even philosophical nature to say this. Not in the least there is the practical expectation that a growing number of western students in architecture will, in the course of their careers, become involved with Third World questions either directly or indirectly. It will not hurt at all when they can study with Third World colleagues with whom they may work in the future.

But I believe that there are other reasons for connecting western

education to Third World problems. These are of a more intellectual nature and they have to do with the future of our profession as a whole. *I firmly believe that our profession will only have a future if it can deal with a profound and central question that comes from an interaction between architects from both sides of the world.*

I am talking about the following question. What is generally valid and generally applicable in the field of architecture? A profession can only be a profession when it shares certain principles, theories, and methods that it holds as valid and useful in all circumstances and in all places. What are the shared principles, theories, and methods in architecture? If we cannot answer this with a reasonable degree of consensus we will not have a profession and we will continue to lose credibility in a rapidly changing world. *This* question, which I hold to be fundamental, can easily be ignored in a homogeneous culture where practice is in harmony with its context. It becomes unavoidable, however, when such practice is confronted with a different cultural context. The best reason that I can see for the education of Third World students in European schools is that such education forces us to sort out what is universally valid and applicable in architecture. It makes us define the field. It is good for architecture everywhere.

The making of buildings and settlements is, by definition, a local affair. Architecture is the making of the right building at the right

moment in the right place. It is an act that can never repeat itself in the same way. It is intimately connected to local conditions, customs, climate, culture, and resources. We are interested in the enormous range of possible contexts, the variety of social, cultural, technical, and economic conditions within which architecture must come about. What can we bring to bear in all circumstances and all places that may be helpful and effective?

When this question comes up, as it inevitably does when one contemplates the state of architecture today, I often think of another discipline in which the tensions between the local and the general must be relevant too. I refer to agriculture. There is nothing more local than the raising of crops. To farm is to attach oneself to a piece of land. Certain plants only grow in certain places. To make them grow the farmer must know the place. Architecture, the art of settlement, is like that. It is not only that the building must serve local needs. This functional argument is much too limited. The building must be built by local workers, it must perform in a local climate, it may use local materials, and it must honor local codes. Therefore, it must be nursed into existence in harmony with all these factors. A successful project is cultivated locally. But the act of building is also an instance in a continuous process of change and renewal by means of which built environments live and prosper. If this analogy with farming is acceptable, what then, we must ask, may the cultiva-

tors of the built environment share dispersed as they are across the far corners of the world?

Agriculture is a professional field. It studies the nature of plants, their properties, metabolism, and chemistry. It also concerns ways of cultivation and their relation to local conditions. It must also have to do with the exercise of appropriate judgment in time and place. It may be that other families always seem to be happier than one's own, but I tend to think that we have not come that far yet in architecture. We have not yet separated that clearly the local from the universal. Unlike the farmer, who, I suspect, knows what he is doing, the architect is often confused about his role in the world. We like to debate a variety of images of what an architect is and what he does. We think of the architect as an artist, a reformer, an organizer, a mediator, an orchestrator. We borrow from many fields: science, sociology, psychology, technology, linguistics, economics, and, most recently, anthropology. But who and what are we ourselves?

Let me offer my simple conviction. I believe that the architect's business is built form. He must understand it and be capable of organizing it. To be sure, the built environment is a social artifact. Everybody understands it in an implicit way. It does not exist by the grace of architects but will exist as long as people inhabit the earth. Built form is not our exclusive product but it is the subject of our expertise. The architect may be more sensitive to built

form than the layman and he may be very skillful in its manipulation but these qualities are not enough to establish his expertise among the many other professionals who have an impact on the built environment. It is also necessary that he understand form in an explicit, codified way; understand the deployment of materials in space, the organization of space itself as a vehicle for behavior, for power, for territorial organization, for self-expression, and for collective coherence among people. In this way the general must emerge from local experience.

This professional understanding of form, it seems to me, must come to us in two major ways: we need, first of all, *theories* that formulate this shared understanding of form. These theories must explain to us the *behavior of form* under the pressures of habitation and social interaction in the context of technology, climate, and topography. Through the continuous shaping and re-shaping of such theories the large amount of facts already available about built environments can become comprehensive and useful to the architectural profession. In time our theories may point toward new questions and help focus a search for new data. They may contribute to the general study of human settlements that we share with other disciplines.

Second, there are ways of working. *Methods of design and form manipulation* can be developed and studied. We can learn from a comparison of methods and can seek general principles as well. Methods

are, of course, related to theory. Implicitly or explicitly they rest on theory. They link theory to practice as they shape the processes taking place. The application of a method tests its underlying theory. Shortcomings of methods lead to new theoretical work. Hence the international discourse that we seek must lead toward theory and methodology. I have argued that in the comparison of different local problems we will find what we share in our professions. I will try to make my point by applying it. Let us consider the educational needs of a Third World student in architecture with those of his fellow student from a western country.

To begin with there is what can be called the question of conflicting values. Our Third World student—we all know—is torn between the values of the western world as these are reflected in products, styles, and criteria that he learns about, and the indigenous spaces, forms, and materials that represent his own tradition. Chances are, when he comes home to practice his profession, his position is not shared by those he must work with or wants to work for—regardless of what that position may be. The ramifications are many. Background, religion, family, peer group, economic means, career expectations, and political motivations all contribute to the inescapable awareness that the world of architecture is not one of homogeneous value.

Our western student will not operate in a world of homogeneous value either. I do not mean to say

that the West does not have different cultures and traditions, but even the architect who stays within his own country finds himself trying to operate in at least three separate value systems at the same time.

There is, first of all, the professional world: the peer group system. It manifests itself in magazines and other publications, at professional conferences, and especially in our teaching. It is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it demands that our student becomes a “leader” in the eyes of his peers. There is only true prestige and glory in the eyes of the profession itself. He is expected to look down on bureaucrats, lawyers, and technicians who are believed to hamper quest for architectural excellence and is encouraged to treat clients and users with benevolent paternalism. On the other hand, he must obtain this professional glory by finding his own “voice.” Above all he must be original. To be good in architecture is to be different, or at least to be part of the latest development. The worst is to be accused of doing something already done by someone else.

When this student enters the world he will find that his client is unaware of the values within the architect’s profession. He has his own notions about good and bad. The client today, moreover, is seldom the user of the building. The users themselves may have their own value system that is different from that of client and architect. I do not have to elaborate further. The western student will never operate in a homogeneous value system either.

It is useless, obviously, when considering an educational program, to try to decide what is the right value system. It is also foolish, obviously, to try to create an artificially homogeneous value system in a school. Most of our educational system as well as our professional skills still stem from a distant past where a homogeneous value system shared by all parties involved could reasonably be expected. Because we refuse to see the discrepancy between this professional tradition and today's reality we fall hopelessly short in professional and educational effectiveness. It takes a confrontation with the problems of the Third World to acknowledge this discrepancy.

Some may argue that technology is an even more important aspect of the relation between developing and developed nations. When we talk about development we think about technology. We believe that our culture need not be superior to another. We want to live in a world of different cultures. But what really separates nations is their control over technology. Western European technology has triggered the serious imbalance with which we now must deal in the world. We know the devastating impact that can come from a single-minded application of new technologies on the subtle but vulnerable ways in which traditional materials and building systems are integrated with house form, life-style, and climate. We know how people can suffer from well-intended attempts to modernize the built environment.

Some argue that inevitably modern

technology will take over from traditional ways and that a price must be paid. Others argue that technology is basically neutral: that any form can be made in different ways and that performance has more than one solution. There is no reason, from that point of view, to condemn technology as long as one knows it well and contains it. Still others argue that technology consists not only of materials and engineering principles but of ways of working that are inevitably linked with forms of organization and, therefore, with social structure. Hence import of technology is import of social structure that is inevitably disruptive.

There is, of course, truth in all these positions. We are only slowly beginning to understand the complex relationships between ways of making, social organization, and cultural value. One thing, however, is clear. The architect who operates in developing countries will not operate in a homogeneous building system. His abilities of form making cannot depend on just one way of building.

But his colleagues in the West have already wrestled with this problem for a long time. The age of industrialization brought a proliferation of materials and building techniques. The architect and the engineer parted long ago. I believe that there is a causal relation between the ideology of abstract form in modern architecture—the international style—and the proliferation of new materials and ways of building that took place in the beginning of this century. But this is

not the moment to explore this interesting connection.

Because of that ideology, however, we have been able to avoid the problem in theoretical and methodical terms. The question of form making in a technically diverse world is clearly felt yet remains unexplored. There is no explicit, rational debate. Architectural education has not come to grips with the issue either. There is the design studio and there is the building technology workshop. They have no common theory of form making and remain in an uneasy relation to one another as do the architect and the engineer.

In the western world we have been able to circumvent the problem for much longer than we can rightly afford to. In the Third World we can no longer ignore it. To teach our student from the Third World we must come to grips with an issue that is equally important for his friend in Europe.

It is not uncommon that we come to see our own problems better when we first study those of our neighbors. The case of mass housing is another example. In Europe particular socioeconomic conditions coupled with a rapid increase of the urban population and the devastation caused by World War II brought forth extensive deployments of repetitious blocks composed of uniform units. They were the result of the belief that the good environment for the modern citizen could be provided by massive infusions of capital, expertise, and centralized organization. The

underlying ideology was that decent living for all was, first of all, a matter of professional responsibility: a gift from those who “knew” and “could” bestowed on those who were “unable” and “ignorant.”

This was a powerful dream. However, it was a typically technocratic dream and when transported to developing countries its futility as a general solution became painfully clear. No government, no matter how rich, can provide ready-made dwellings to all its citizens. The only hope for decent shelter for all is to encourage people to develop their own. For some 20 years now in Latin America, the Middle East, and the Far East, and more recently in Africa, architects and other professionals have been involved in a slow and difficult learning process. They have come to share the basic understanding that a built environment must be cultivated first of all by those who inhabit. People have always built for themselves, but they need professional help. This worldwide experiment entailed a radical change of professional attitude vis-à-vis the built environment because the western European model, which was taught for so long in architectural schools, was diametrically opposed to the idea of gradual cultivation.

The case of mass housing is a good example of a problem in which the experience of many in very different locations around the world seems to lead to a consensus among experts about some general principles. The western student will benefit from study of what is done in some Third World countries and what is

advocated by such international agencies as the World Bank. His Third World counterpart would learn from alternative approaches that are now tried out in the West.

We can now see the central issue with which the architecture profession must wrestle if it wants a future for itself. The question of conflicting values, the problem of a variety of ways of building, and the issue of housing for the masses are each part of a conflict of two professional models. The first model is the one that we have inherited from the western European architectural tradition. In this model the architect is seen primarily as the maker of the exceptional product, for an exceptional occasion, and for exceptional use. Even in residential construction it sees the architect as the maker of monuments: buildings that by their very existence must transcend time and must symbolize special values. In this traditional model the architect shared his client's values. The user was not known as a separate power, and skills and trades operated in a homogeneous technical system known by all. This professional image may have been appropriate in the past, but today it offers a hopelessly obsolete model.

The alternative model sees the architect engaged in the cultivation of the everyday environment that was taken for granted in the past. In this model the result is not static but must change and grow over time. It is not an exception to but reality itself. It is full of meaning but not a symbol for society. This alternative model of the professional

role is based on the awareness that monuments will eventually grow in a healthy built environment, yet that a healthy built environment can never be made out of monuments. This simple truth has been revealed to many of us but it is still not generally understood. European architects were the first to declare their concern for the quality of the everyday environment. The Chartre d'Athenes architects saw everything that was built—the dwelling, the factory, the railroad station—as important and worth their attention. However, the sad reality is that we never examined the attitude necessary to deal with the everyday environment. We continued to approach all these new and exciting problems as we approached the problem of building the exceptional. Classic symbolism was replaced by technological symbolism and is now traded for historic reference. Avant-gardism, form ideology, and, above all, peer-group approval remained the yardsticks for professional esteem. They are still, when all is said and done, the formal criteria in education. We may have abolished the beaux arts way of working, but we have not abandoned the dream of professional achievement as it was enshrined in the academy. Our genuine concern for the built environment as a whole is not matched by our behavior, methods, or skills. The reasons for this ambivalent attitude are, of course, part of the broader dilemma of modern professionalism: when does expertise nourish the common good?

We must ask ourselves whether we can afford to be confused much

longer. But I believe one thing is certain. The challenges of the Third World will bring forth a new practitioner more in tune with the intelligence, sensitivity, and understanding necessary to do a good job for the everyday environment. The new role model will come into its

own. It will be equally valid for the architect in the developed countries as it is for his colleague in the Third World. The question of course is *how* it will come about.

Will the Third World eventually produce this new architect in spite

of westernized education or will it be the result of a joint effort to deal with the realities of the built environment rather than with the dreams of an obsolete profession? Who, indeed, will learn from whom?