

## "Pedagogical Questions (: subtitle as desired)"

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### Abstract

There is substantial evidence that suggests a significant shift in emphasis in the pedagogical intentions within the core design curricula of many schools of architecture. This shift seems focused on the design process as an internally and subjectively rigorous, yet mystical, creative act, and is strongly juxtaposed to traditional methods of program-dependent teaching that emphasize the architectural product or specifically architectural production. I might tentatively define this shift as fundamentally paradigmatic: the operative model for teaching in the design studio has been moving away from the technical or programmatic concerns of the profession (as embodied in the technical, structural and historical support courses) for some time now. The operative model, while by no means codified, is moving toward a broader definition of what constitutes the "architectural".

As a consequence of this shift, I would like to focus on the potential implications of that shift in architectural education. The issues raised center on this question: if our intentions as design educators are, in fact, to broaden the discourse by drawing from outside the conventionally understood boundaries of architecture (as defined by an institutionalized profession), what are the implications in the fact that such a paradigm already actively exists in the studio, in particular, in the beginning or core studios in many architectural curricula? At the center of this discussion lies a concern for what, if any, identifiable system(s) of validation or authorization are being used to justify architectural thinking and action. In effect, do those validating conditions lie within the canonical body of knowledge of the autonomous discipline of "architecture", or are there other conceivable justifications for that thought and action? And this is a particularly poignant question to be raised in relation to the changes occurring in the core design curricula within schools of architecture today.

Much of this process of dismantling the old paradigms of architectural education can be attributed to the developing attitude among architectural educators, particularly those educated in the late 1980's and early 1990's, which mandates a broadened of point of view (even the multiplication of points of view). Such attitudes derive in large measure from the recent and wide-spread interest in new forms of cultural criticism: all of which are struggling to redefine the nature of repressed or "secondary" forms of cultural expression in relation to the primary cultural norm. Within the framework of this new mode of cultural criticism, questions are raised which confront the essential role and function of criticism in the design studio. Likewise, questions regarding the role of "programs" as the fundamental pedagogical tool must also be questioned.

### Presentation Format

Rather than provide a conclusive response to these questions of pedagogy, this presentation will formulate a series of observations and questions as a critique of both pedagogical positions: to open discussion of the broader implications of "broadening the discourse", for administrators, educators, and professionals.

## Paper

"Pedagogical Questions (: subtitle as desired)" is not an equivalent to "Untitled". The question, and the subtext are sincere in their concerns. It is so titled because it seems to me that the pedagogical systems under which we are operating are increasingly diverse and without doubt, more connected to the complex subtexts and desires latent in cultural phenomena and less connected to the traditional concerns of a traditional professional education. The old mechanisms of authorizing or validating architectural production as an autonomous and objective discipline have come increasingly under attack and that attack has probably been formulated by many of us at this conference. It is promulgated through the dissemination of pedagogical positions and propaganda in the writings of faculty and the publications of student work from Schools of Architecture across the country. This search for validation outside the traditionally prescribed boundaries of "architecture" for both educators and professionals seems to me to beg some essential questions about the nature of the educational process and its ultimate goals.

Those questions are pertinent to the title insofar as, first, this is not a talk that proposes to answer any of the questions raised, only to open the field for discourse. Second, twenty of the fifty-four papers given at this conference are introduced by a two-part title. Each title asks us to accept the necessity of the subtitle, to accept the necessity for an interpretive addendum to the primary title, effectively deconstructing the original title in favor of, and in complicity with a significant subtext. This seems particularly relevant to a pedagogical method that advocates this necessary act of architectural interpretation by the author (the student rather than the critic). Third, through the use of the word "desire" we come to the heart of both the act of critical questioning and the commensurate act of individual interpretation as necessary elements of the design process. Desire is evocative and provocative. It has pretensions to the mystical rather than the rational. It describes a method of operation that, while open to many external influences, remains concealed and concealing, and thus, covertly less open to external criticism.

In response to what appears to be a significant shift in educational emphasis I have some real curiosity and concern for the implications of this pedagogical shift. That curiosity stems from some observations about emerging pedagogical positions in beginning architectural education. As the director of the second year studio curriculum at Tulane University, I have a certain vested interest in negotiating a path through the expansive changes in attitude that seem to be occurring in core curricula in many Schools of Architecture. That interest, and the root of that curiosity, is compounded as I observe the increasing distance and difference between the pedagogical systems being employed in the studio environment and the continuation of traditional pedagogical methods and goals in the coursework outside the studio.

There are currently two "positions" which are being argued quite strongly at Tulane, and I think it can be documented that such discussions is occurring elsewhere with equal intensity. The first, holding the metaphorical "high ground", argues that all beginning students need a firm foundation in the traditions or conventions of

architecture. These traditions represent an allegedly necessary and commonly accepted knowledge base upon which students can then enter the profession and make competent and aesthetically pleasing (or at least acceptable) buildings. The introduction and acquisition of visual and compositional skills are the primary pedagogical goals of this pedagogical system. This position is common and well-known. Its authority stems from a general inertia associated with maintaining the traditions of the past, and a certain complicity with existing social, political and economic power structures. In this system the studio critic functions as the ultimate arbiter of form and meaning. Its forms, too, are commonplace and well documented. Finite and definitive geometries predominate. Institutional or functional programs drive a product-oriented education. It is a purportedly collective and certainly authoritarian system. It seeks formal and epistemological closure. It is the primary.

The second (and emerging) position can best be described as the "primacy of the periphery". Any analysis of these critiques of conventional pedagogies -- those that are driving the emergence of new issues in architectural education -- must be seen in the larger context of alternative strategies for cultural criticism and social change currently in debate among many American academics. While there is not the opportunity to analyze in detail the specific causes for the cultural shifts occurring the United States, it can be attributed generally to the enfranchisement of social groups outside of the centers of traditional cultural dominance [race, gender, and sexual orientation among others], and an evolving multi-cultural democratization of societal institutions. These cultural phenomena find expression in the theoretical rhetoric of deconstruction, post-structuralism, feminist criticism and other forms of cultural analysis.

The practical result of these critical positions for the educational paradigm of architecture is that the previously accepted knowledge base for the architect must itself change in order to acknowledge and accommodate the changes occurring in the wider cultural. The need for objective authority is at once suspect by its complicity with past systems of societal control. The intention is to strip away the veil of objectivity to reveal the rich diversity of value in the poetic and individual.

In this "system" (and I use system advisedly), the introduction of critical thinking skills is seen as at least commensurate with formal and graphic skill acquisition. Conceptualization and the intellectualization of the architectural act is given precedence over the hierarchical geometries of the past. Its authority stems primarily from the intentional negation of the epistemological autonomy of the primary -- from the dismantling or distortion of architecture as preconception. The subjective and intuitive are premiated over the objective. Here, the studio critic functions in a less clearly defined role, perhaps best described as methodological facilitator. Both form and meaning are fluid, insubstantial, necessarily personalized and often obscure. Its forms, too, are immaterial, diaphanous, multiplied and overlapping. Programs become a function of the student's personalized interpretive process rather than a set of finite criteria for evaluation and critique. Fact is a commodity to be manipulated by desire. This pedagogical methodology is at home without a home. Transience and incompleteness negate the closure of the process.

The following piece by Nina Hofer from the University of Florida's publication, *Constructions* (p.9), is most representative of this pedagogical paradigm shift in beginning design education:

"Most students enter the first year of architecture school with some certainty that they know what architecture is. All too often this initial knowing is composed of a set of images; these images cover up another kind of knowledge -- concepts, processes, materially and physically known things that may not at first seem relevant. The important 'unteaching' that unbinds the learning process begins with the faculty and takes place through the formulation of studio project assignments as we attempt to introduce the constructed world in a way that will bypass preconceived assumptions and predetermined results."

"The desperation of 'new form' can only be addressed by switching our attention to new content. I paraphrase: 'Invention is forgetting the name of the thing one sees -- and then naming it again.' Because in the end, once they have been lost and rediscovered, nothing is more full of invention than words: site, program, plan . . . context, section, wall. . . . window, room, furniture .[or city, room, garden if you prefer] . architecture."

Architectural authority doesn't come from the conventions of tradition but from a negation of that tradition. In fact, the authorization comes from the personal and self-referential interpretation of the word. The inflection, then, is away from product and toward the process of internal investigation. Yet, such an investigation also accepts that each of these words is no longer an elemental piece of an autonomous or objective architecture, but that, instead, such words are laden with meanings that slide into and out of the seductive milieu of contemporary culture. Clearly, in this case, the architectural project is no longer driven neither by a functional program, nor a binding tradition of forms. The subtext is everything, derived from an expansion of the architectural into regions thought previously beyond its borders. Desire is the bedfellow of the subtext. The inversion from product to process is the logical mechanism for any architectural manifestation of this new position.

In contrast to the linear process of project (and product) development, which begins with conventional analyses and research into formal and functional precedents and ends with something understood as architecture as building, this argument contests the need for any such building at all. Instead architecture can now be defined by conceptual constructs and the graphic representations of intellectual and intuitive processes. It certainly problematizes "making" and "knowing". What else it does in terms of the educational process remains an open question.

What *is* apparent in the writings and work shown in current school publications, and from course descriptions and discussions with beginning design educators, is that this strategy of core as generative knowledge base, complete with a closed formal vocabulary, is being contested, "interrogated", by the opening of architectural thinking to non-traditional methods and their resultant forms.

This process of change is not yet codified, although from the prodigious written and graphic output of its advocates at Columbia University, one can begin to see the shape of things to come. It is incomplete, and by the admission of those advocates, it must necessarily remain so. The potential benefits to the development of a new

definition of the architect's role in the larger cultural *milieu* are significant. Teaching students to engage the world critically may produce some of the most culturally relevant architecture seen in the last century.

By the same token, the necessary incompleteness, and fundamentally internal processes that are proposed in lieu of traditional methods and goals raise questions about authority. What constitutes the authorizing agent in this new architectural work? What is the role of the studio critic and of criticism in general beyond promoting individual self-actualization? If the architect's primary role is again the role of cultural critic rather than functional facilitator, as it was in the early years of the Modern Movement, is there any possibility of communicating any collectively understood system of meaning or value? In this culture, is that even important? Are we merely constructing a seductive labyrinth of neo-formalism with which we replace the old formalism and from which we cannot escape?

These are open questions, debatable questions. I confess to a desire to be seduced. But first I must consider the consequences of the very process of my seduction.

If we suspend our disbelief in the fixity of anything but a temporary and continually evolving matrix of values, do we destroy the host which houses our capacity for disbelief? In other words, if the hierarchies and orders established over the past 500 years are dismantled and disintegrate under the impetus of this new *zeitgeist*, and the critique envelopes the normative, what, beyond the abyss of negation, remains? These are the questions of consequence which design educators must raise when validation, authenticity and authority -- the principle functions of past critical positions -- become marginalized. The center cannot hold and all that remains in its place is the not so neutral ground of the periphery. It is there on the periphery that we find the many rather than the one. The decentralization of architectural theory and of the pedagogical aims of architectural education allows us the opportunity to explore the territory that is left. It is an open landscape.