

Architecture and Education I Interview 2

Pascal Flammer and Raphael Zuber | January 2011

Samuel Penn: The Bologna Declaration proposes a higher education system based on a vocational model. Do you think that studying architecture is a training or can it be something more internal, something of itself – can you separate architecture from the training to become an architect?

Pascal Flammer: I must say I don't really see the difference.

SP: Can you see a way that you could learn about architecture without having to eventually end up as an architect – for instance if you were interested in architecture but didn't want to become an architect, where would you be able to do this at the moment?

PF: Ok, so it would be a place where you talk and think about architecture but you would not intend to do it – to exercise architecture. In the end I think there are a lot of ways to get in touch or to understand architecture. Basically it's a question of being aware of things in a wide way. I can imagine that you can become an architect from many directions, like for instance by studying mathematics or philosophy, or art. I could also imagine that you could do it via hand-crafts. I think education is very important if a person is unable to find their own way. It can help them to get the tools to invent architecture. If you are not able to do this then I think it really helps to have somebody that is somehow a partner to help channel your thinking. But principally I can imagine that you could get a very good architect without this specific training. I just think it's very rare.

SP: I'm just thinking about other cultural fields, for instance in the arts or in curating where there are many other related jobs surrounding the scene. Particularly in the arts there are a lot of people doing a lot of different cultural jobs to support and make it function. It just seems to me that perhaps in architecture, there is one kind of training – to become an architect, and there's no value or appreciation placed on the other aspects that could be there to help the culture of architecture. There is one way of doing things and I am interested in exploring the possibility of courses where one wouldn't just study to become an architect. But at the moment it may be that the only way you can be involved or gain some sort of status is to be a member of the BSA (Bund Schweizer Architekten). Then, once you are there you can do the cultural things that you want. In other fields there is already much more of a mechanism to encourage this sort of thing.

Raphael Zuber: What kind of mechanism are you talking about? Do you mean that teachers from other fields could teach at an architecture school?

SP: Not quite. It's about broadening architecture as a field within itself – to realise that not everybody will be the kind of person that will want to start an office, or that not everyone will be the kind of person that wants to work in an office, but that there might be more opportunity for supportive roles. I mean, these jobs do already exist to a certain extent, like the architectural journalist or the curator that creates architectural exhibitions, but mostly they come to architecture from a different sphere like critical theory or creative media studies. At the moment we have no courses that deal with these positions in architecture. Yesterday we said that we would like it if there were more people that would take up these roles, but the courses don't exist. So we focus completely on this one role of the architect as auteur.

PF: I think it starts, as with all professions, when you decide yourself that you want to be an architect – that now I'm an architect. In the past here in Switzerland Max Frisch once studied architecture and then decided to be a writer. He studied architecture and then became a writer. I can also imagine it the other way round. It's not so important what and when you study. But I think it's important that one day, you take a conscious decision to concentrate on something.

SP: However, if you've spent five years at a school, and then after four years realise that this isn't what you necessarily wanted to do – or after three years you're still really interested in architecture but would like to be in a slightly different role, then there isn't really much opportunity to explore those other aspects at the moment.

PF: I can't remember the exact numbers but I think around twenty percent of students who study architecture are still architects thirty years after they finish school. So the other eighty percent must be somewhere. They go into different fields or become mothers or fathers. I think that the model already exists and that most of the architecture students are not architects after twenty years.

SP: So, even though you might not know it when you start, you do five years and it's been a great eye opener for you, and it's been a good education. You've learned something and you don't need to become an architect – but you've expanded your mind and it may help you to become something else. Even though there isn't a mechanism in education to do something else, one can see that it happens anyway. So you don't really need to change the format?

PF: I think you do five years independent of your study where you learn a specific way to think, and you can apply this later to many branches.

SP: That's if you are taught a way to think, and that then very much depends on the people you have at a school.

RZ: I think that whatever model of school you have that it should be intense and that you are also confronted with strong personalities, and that you have to deal with things somehow, and to deal with yourself in the end of course. This then leads to your own position and what you do with it after.

SP: This was the idea we spoke about earlier, about meeting people that challenge you. If we are heading toward a more curricula based education, one where you are being taught by a system and less by the individual personalities, then there is the danger that this very important part could disappear.

RZ: Yes, it's not good enough just to gain one more point on your curriculum. In the end if you're not challenged then you will be difficult to find your bearings. Things will go up and down.

PF: I also think a good teacher can adapt to the students abilities and can give them the appropriate dose of challenges. I think that if we have a unified system then statistically the student will always fall through the mesh, theoretically. So that's why I think it's very important to have a one to one relationship with a person who is able to read you. Because if you just over-stimulate somebody or over-challenge them, then the student will detach. If you under-nourish them intellectually then they will also detach. It requires a very distinctive sort of adaption and ability to fascinate, so that the student goes out of curiosity to their limits. This also then depends on the amount of students that a person has to teach and the infrastructure of the course. It maybe also depends on the salary of the teacher and the physical space that's needed. We shouldn't forget that the teacher should have a joy to come to a certain place to teach. They will also need good input and good surroundings. It's very important that the professors are treated well and that there is the money to provide all this for the students.

SP: Here in Switzerland you don't have quite the same situation as we have in the UK. You have two independent membership bodies. We have the RIBA who are employed to oversee what is taught in schools and the ARB that set the criteria that need to be followed in schools. Broadly speaking they set out what schools are supposed to be teaching. At the moment the criteria are still open to interpretation, but due to a culture of targets and quality assurance they are becoming much more important. Through certain agencies, some without real mandate, a particular political agenda is being rolled out. Universities are constitutionally still supposed to be independent. Are they still independent here in Switzerland? I hear that the schools here regulate themselves more or less. How does this work in practice if for instance you go to the ETH or Mendrisio to assure that you get the same level of architects?

PF: We were both at school before this credit system and as a teacher I don't really know this system. I can only really speak about the situation before the credit system. Here it is clear that different schools have different directions. If you go to a Fachhochschule you would learn something else than if you went to the ETH or Mendrisio.

SP: This is interesting because it says something about the character of a school, and that you might be attracted to go to one because it had a particular way of working. This isn't just created by individuals but by the culture of the school. If regulation starts to dominate then schools will become more homogenised. I think there is the danger of something being lost there. I don't think this will happen in Switzerland because the schools look after themselves.

PF: But I think at the moment it doesn't matter. It's really much more dependent on whether you have a good teacher. I can imagine that these guys at the ETH or Mendrisio or whatever school, that the

real fire to become an architect comes from man to man, and I don't think from the direction of the school. Within a school you have different factions – people that go for this and that. There is no such thing as a complete regulated system, and I think personally that the school has to create the climate to attract these teachers.

SP: There could be a danger in this also.

PF: I mean now it's a bit simplified. Of course I think it's important that you have a basic knowledge of a lot of stuff that you should learn besides. You just learn it and then it's done. You read it once and then you have an exam on it. This is just working – like fleissarbeit. You need a minimum understanding of structure, money, laws, history and so on. This I think is good, but it doesn't make you an architect. And in the end this is not intellectually so challenging, it's just knowledge. This you can get wherever and you can learn this easily at university because it's accessible.

SP: That sounds to me like something you could do at a Fachhochschule. You could go to a college and learn all this kind of stuff, and there would be teachers who are geared towards delivering that material – a good foundation for learning how to put things together, regulations and finance and so on. And then maybe after that you would go to a special school.

RZ: Or parallel.

SP: I mean in universities now even the big names also have to teach that level of material. They would be better suited to inspire and yet have to spend two thirds of their time conforming to this curriculum.

PF: I think this also leads to another problem because if the professor has to work too much at university at a certain point he won't be able to keep their office. I think this is the biggest question. I only know about Switzerland but I think in the end we have a good model here. It's good that the professor brings his practice into the school and the other way round. It nourishes both sides. A school has to produce a climate where this is possible. Then there are professors who teach more and others who build more good buildings with their office. This is a liberty that must exist to make good teaching.

SP: This also has a lot to do with how the profession engages with education, because here in Switzerland most professors are still practicing architects. This means that the profession is still very much part of the education system here.

RZ: It's almost the center.

Samuel Penn: In Britain there are now more and more career academics who are not practicing. They are in full time academia and then they kind of loose touch, they might be doing high-level research but they are not engaged in the day-to-day practice of architecture.

PF: It's not only about day-to-day, it's about being keen to get on a new step that you can egotistically profit from by being at the school. It's almost a selfish thought. And then if it's selfish it makes it also that at the school you really want to get to a point out of egotistic reasons. But that is also actually helping the student because there is a big ambition. I heard that in Japan Shinohara had his students working at the school for him on private projects. They even mix this. I don't know what it really creates but I see that there are obviously cultures that have taken even further steps in this direction. I hear that practitioners are against this here because professors would get cheap labour – for free, paid for by the government. I can understand this because it gives the other an advantage in the market.

SP: Some people would of course look for this situation. Changing the subject slightly. I like the idea of removing architectural education from universities altogether. How do you think it would reorganise itself if that door was closed? Suppose we could no longer taught architecture at universities. What would be the difference if you're at university or not – would it make a difference?

PF: It would make a difference. It would become animalistic and lower standards. It would just be market driven.

SP: And it's not market driven at the moment?

PF: Now it's regulated.

SP: You think it's regulated by the universities?

PF: There's a filter. There are competitions that you cannot enter without a certain diploma or qualification. There is a filter to keep certain people out. Without these filters people would naturally just go for the easiest way to make money. I think this would screw up the system.

SP: If the profession was to take more, perhaps not all, but more of a role in education. If the people in the profession took more responsibility to drive education as opposed to the universities, which are no longer based on a state funded model and therefore can no longer be altruistic in the general sense – they are becoming market driven entities themselves. Would it be prudent, if both factions are driven by the market, that the profession, who know more about the subject would set themselves up to train architects outside of the university system? Or do you still think there is a benefit to being at a university and what might those be?

PF: Of course the market it there to make a profit. You invest for a certain aim, which in some cases I can imagine is very good. I think it's necessary to have grundlagenforschung (research) where you study something without the goal of producing a product – understanding how things work rather than how to use it. I think we need this. The same goes for Theory and the humanities.

SP: Another part of the Bologna Declaration is to focus on the applied sciences and to reposition the arts and humanities. I mean most of the funding will go to applied sciences and that's where the research funding is going at the moment – where you can apply it and make money. The value of a knowledge culture is slowly disappearing in universities, but the good thing about this is that it will then occur somewhere else. I wonder if parts of our architectural education, if it no longer has a place in universities will go somewhere else.

PF: In the past the entire domain of how people thought used to be based around theology, philosophers and ideology. Neuroscience now dominates this domain. The newest results about how people think come from this field and no longer from the classical branches of thought. I could imagine that some of the topics that we used to think were important will eventually disappear.

SP: Do you mean to say that there is an inevitable transition happening and rather than going against it we should simply explore where it takes us?

PF: This is what I can't decide.

RZ: I could imagine that universities will have to change, and that this is already happening. There are private schools starting elsewhere. It could be a good idea, probably not for students just beginning their education who will just choose the school their friends are going to – but maybe later when you are more involved and interested. You would go there to meet the right people and develop consciously. It might be that you would go just for that.

SP: To expand on that, if that school was more than a think tank that produced research or just ideas, like we discussed yesterday, but could produce architects in a different way, it would be interesting, out-with a regulated system.

RZ: You mean to produce architects itself?

SP: Yes. I don't see why after some initial general practical training there couldn't be a two-year period where you would become an architect intellectually. I don't think the think tank idea is enough though. There are already think tanks. I am interested in the idea of a school.

RZ: Then it has to be more like a masters system. You would get your basic tools somewhere else and then you would go there to go further. But again, for this you have to get good teachers. Like we said before, they won't want to just go there to prepare lectures. They will want to go there to have fun.

SP: I agree. Can we talk a little about your period as a guest professor there in 2009. You spent a whole semester in the studio without asking the students to do any design work. It's interesting because I see that at the moment design and architectural training are very complicit, and most

teachers think that if you just give the students a design task that they will then automatically learn about architecture. What if you removed design and simply studied, analyzed and appreciated architecture? Do you think there always needs to be a parallel where you study design and then analysis, theory and so on?

RZ: The course was one semester and I enjoyed it, and the students did as well. What we did was basically thinking and talking. In the end it was about finding their first directions. It was a perfect theoretical exercise for one semester. But I don't know if you can learn to design a building just by talking and thinking. I see that for myself, when I do projects, for a long time I think and also talk, but at a certain point I have to draw and have to see something. Maybe not just by myself but with a collaborator. I have to see something – a product to make the next step, and to go further and develop. I don't know if you have to do this at a school already or if you could just start afterwards, but at some point you have to start with this if you want to build.

SP: The question is then – when somehow? We find our student come to university already pre-programmed with an idea of what they want to express or produce – and I think it's completely natural that when you're eighteen you come with strong idea that you want to communicate. However, we then spend a lot of our time helping to redirect that energy to produce something that works within the parameters, but it's a fight. It's not just a struggle – we fight to turn around these minds. I wonder whether there's a way for students to come prepared with a greater appreciation of the area they are entering. For me this ties up with diminishing the importance of design because it's just used as a vehicle for self-expression at that stage. That's why I liked your project, because it still seemed like a very creative process where the students were allowed to make meaningful decisions, but they never designed anything.

RZ: But this was a special case, and I have no idea if the students will make good buildings after this.

SP: So do you think the studio design project is the best vehicle for testing this?

RZ: Well, maybe you don't even have to do this in a school – you just go on and start to build.

PF: I don't believe in using just one way, designing or studying. They nourish each other. You need to see how far you can go, and you can't only do this by imagining the implications. But on the other side to creation doesn't just happen. This is something that you are either able to do naturally or you have learned to create and develop. The genius knows it and this is extremely rare, it doesn't even make sense to talk about it. Or you are not a genius, and I would say that all of us are not. So then you have to train and then it's very important to have good professors to help.

SP: And to provide a good example.

PF: Yes, but it's also up to the teacher to make sure the student is able to do it. They shouldn't provide them with recipes but teach them how to make their own.

RZ: I also think that creating should be fun – that you can see a development. It's important to see a result.

SP: That's something that keeps you going. Even though it might be difficult and there isn't a perfect system. One of my issues though, do to with this exploratory approach is that it's assessed, that you might completely fail at the end. And instead of that being valued, that you tried hard but it didn't work, then you get assessed and fail. It's frustrating because then you can have a less dedicated individual that will just learn to tick the boxes and will pass.

PF: Success is not an objective thing. It depends on the professor and how he defines success. Of course I can imagine that someone might say that the goal is to make it work and that's it, but if it's about finding something out or having some aspects in your design that are really well defined then that's up to the person making the criteria for success and failure.

SP: In Britain the criteria are decided by a board somewhere in London. In Switzerland it does seem that the schools themselves decide and that if they make the right decisions then the students will want to go there. It's a bit like an open marketplace.

PF: As far as I'm aware the professors are able to say if a student passes or not. They make the criteria and that's it.

RZ: And then there is the risk that the professor doesn't want to fail students, and that the school doesn't want to fail students to compete in the marketplace.

SP: This is an example of a problem of a commercial education system – one that's not state-funded. When I was at university I got a full grant and could swap courses – in a way that way was more aligned with the original premise of the Bologna Declaration.

PF: But there is also something else, from the point of view of being an architect with a practice to do with who I would employ or not, even now with this credit system, I still want to know which professor they were working with. And I want to see what mark they got with this professor. I would trust this professors judgment much more than if they got the credits or not. Even if we have a plateau with all these schools, if you are a good student and you have the chance to choose then you will choose something specific to challenge you, even within the credit system.

SP: There's a percentage of people that have this kind of ambition – perhaps a minority. The majority won't I think. Most will be processed through the system and just come out the other end with big bills, and maybe the real education starts for them after university anyway.

PF: But if the student realises that there are better schools with better studios that have higher ambitions, then they will go there.

RZ: Then there will also be teachers that are known, where you can pass quite easily, some students prefer this and they will do this.