

Architecture and Education I Interview 1

Beat Consoni I January 2011

Samuel Penn: I know that you are intimately involved in both practice and education here in the North-East of Switzerland and I first wanted to ask a little bit about the European context the Swiss Higher Education sector sits in since it signed up to the Bologna Declaration in the 1990's. It's obvious to me that the Declaration has affected its members differently and I wonder how you feel it has influenced architectural education in Switzerland?

Beat Consoni: The system of collecting ETCS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) points for the Bachelor and Master has not transformed schools radically but there are noticeable changes. It means the way of teaching, the aims and the content of the education, have been influenced by the adoption of that system and the variety of subjects has grown because of the obligation to research, which is good. In general I feel that when we had Diplomas there was a more intense and perhaps intimate relationship between the school and its students. Another aspect that has changed since the Bologna Declaration is the aptitude of the individual students. More than before, there are now students with very different personal and educational backgrounds. The quality of students has decreased because schools are interested in accepting as many of them as possible. This is less of a problem at the ETH who have enough students because they are well known abroad but also very well supported economically – they had to introduce the 'numerus clauses' (closed number) because they couldn't accept everyone. Smaller schools like the Fachhochschule in Winterthur – ZHAW (Higher Education Institutions set up principally to cover the areas of technology, social and natural sciences, and art) don't have the same luxury.

SP: There is another point to Bologna, a Declaration which promotes the development of a 'European Education Area'. Part of it is, as far as I can gauge, dedicated to promoting vocational training. I just wonder whether we are in danger of using education instrumentally rather than passing on knowledge from one generation to the next. After Bologna it's difficult to see how tertiary education can be defined without linking it to larger political ideals. It does seem to be vocationally oriented, educating people to find work or join a profession in our case. Coverage of the discipline of architecture (or architecture itself) has shifted into the background and is, I feel, not as important anymore. How do you think this will affect the practice of architecture?

BC: Yes, education is following the general trends of market forces which has become permeated by investor led interests. It's a phenomenon that is happening in education and practice. I think that the conventional architecture office/practice as we know it in Switzerland can not exist much longer. Like in America, there will be more and more investors and commercial developers entering the market. In the end small practices might only be able to rebuild or renovate shops, projects like that. But what is happening to architecture is a question of the culture of architecture. Here in Switzerland we try to encourage young architects to enter competitions. What the EWR (European Economic Area) dictates is that they have to be announced in an open call for tender – a public invitation to tender. But as far as I know this kind of competitive system, which allows young practices to get meaningful work is becoming more and more rare. Nowadays there are fewer open competitions and they are being replaced by these investor-led competitions that younger practices can't take part in or really struggle to be invited on to. This is starting to happen more and more in Switzerland. It makes me think that the way we work now as architects will become much more difficult in the years ahead.

SP: It seems that the environment, the future environment will need students to be prepared to do and understand the business of architecture. In some ways the European idea toward a practical orientation may be a good thing. On the other hand if we go too far down that road we may have to sacrifice a broader understanding of architecture? Perhaps it's too crude to try and polarise the two. We can say, and we have always known this, that architecture is an art and a business.

BC: Well, being an architect is also a passion. It's a difficult and a long process. You can never be sure if you will be able to keep the office going or not. It's always a tight-rope walk. In my office for instance we get the bigger part of our bids by doing competitions. It takes a lot of effort and failure until you finally win and in the end you might only be given a small building to complete. So it's getting harder all round. There's this discrepancy between economy oriented architecture and the – as you called it – passionate architecture. Now the question is – what the schools positions are on this? The schools are forced to think in the economic sense and if there are graduates that work for big investment companies for instance, then it's quite possible that the schools focus will point in this direction. Obviously in this case something is falling by the wayside that in previous generations of

architects might have been a concern. Basically most students now get their masters degree if they are accepted on to the course. When I studied, the equivalent of today's Bachelor Degree used to be respected. It used to encompass all aspects of architectural training. Today, with the training the students get you couldn't put them in front of an investor. They wouldn't know where to start. What we do wrong at our schools in my opinion is that we neglect the execution issue. That means if we had good architects that can also handle money and who develop that usefully, the profession itself or at least this field of the profession would be more widely recognised. We could achieve a higher level of quality in all fields of architecture including the investment sector.

SP: So what I understand is that the less ambitious in terms of design are going to the big commercial practices because somehow in architecture there's this idea, that dealing with business is secondary. Then because it's not really dealt with in the school, the good students, who could potentially benefit from this kind of training, think of architecture as a kind of elite art. At some point it must have changed to focus less on execution and more on the artistic aspects of the subject?

BC: Yes it changed approximately within the past 10 to 15 years or so... I think that in Scotland, England or in France you don't hear about young architects anymore. In Germany you hear less as well. All work is being carried out by large commercial practices. But here we are still fighting against this through our association – the Bund Schweizer Architekten (The Association of Swiss Architects – BSA) who still organise competitions designed to encourage a wide and varied participation.

SP: That neatly leads me to my next question about the BSA and SIA (Schweizerische Ingenieur – und Architektenverein, Swiss Association of Engineers and Architects). We have the ARB (Architects Registration Board) in Britain. But you don't have anything like the ARB that regulates the profession by statute. For us this has an overbearing impact on the professional membership bodies. Essentially it means that government legislation holds a lot of sway in the way we work and teach in the United Kingdom. The BSA and SIA don't have this sort of relationship to Government. They are independent bodies focused on benefiting their members. What influence do they have in Switzerland and is it diminished because they aren't propped up by the state?

BC: Yes, that is another topic. SIA does have political influence. It can do that because it has a certain social importance. It's an association of different university graduates who maintain different natural scientific areas (Naturwissenschaften). The BSA consists of architects who are invited to join. As an architect in a way you have a certain status if you are a part of the BSA. But the commitment of the architects within the association is very limited. It is an association where we socialise and focus on topics that we are concerned about, things we have to deal with that are coming up. I have always taken a stand and am currently very active in the association – for instance in areas like energy, architecture competitions or space planning. Maybe we don't do enough. And we don't do enough in education either... that's an important topic. Even the well known schools have made the same mistakes. They have essentially abandoned planning, an important part of architecture. They talk about it but they haven't taught it properly for years now. In fact for the last ten years they've only been discussing the city villa – or if the window should be left or right! But they've neglected all the important things or haven't approached them in the right way. However as the pressures become apparent, things will change.

SP: Yes, there is a tendency in all schools to fetishise the object and forget about the rest. What would you say is the most important subject to reintroduce to the education of an architect?

BC: Space planning – City and Country Planning. That's quite difficult to achieve politically here in Switzerland. Federalism is very protected and the autonomy of the Municipalities is sacred. But there are other options. For instance that Cantons influence the Municipalities. They could help the Municipalities with advice in developmental programs for instance to encourage them to think on a larger scale, so that the subject is assessed more broadly. Of course that would be a matter for the Cantons and the Federation to negotiate. But yes, as we stand the object, or rather the single building is being over emphasized in architectural education.

SP: Manfredo Tafuri said during the 70s that we have a problem with the capitalist model of producing architecture – where the focus is on money and the celebration of the prototype or the singular product of architecture – that the political and economical model enables only a corrupted self-serving expression of the will of society. He said this a long time ago.

BC: Today all you see are individual objects. People only talk about the star architects. I grew up in a different era. People don't think there is anything left to do in Switzerland. They think that there's no more room for big projects and so they focus on the few highlights produced by a handful of big names. But in reality this country has a lot of problems that need to be addressed, and it is actually a very interesting time. People are struggling to define what needs to be done. Some say we should build up the countryside, some say make the cities denser... urban expansion... agglomeration. In fact the period of the star architect could soon be a memory as we realise the true potential of our profession to develop more substantial strategies. But as yet we still live in our municipalities, hampered by our many borders. It's both good and bad. Maybe from abroad we look like a holy land for architects where everything is perfect. That might have something to do with the fact that we do a good job when it comes to PR.

SP: I'd like to talk a little more about education if possible. In the UK the ARB through the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) regulate the education system. It's a government regulation passed through the filter of a professional membership organisation. Do you think this could happen in Switzerland?

BC: No.

SP: Why not?

BC: In Switzerland the schools are happy to be autonomous. They are very competitive. There are certain lobby groups and agencies that speak for the different sectors in the profession but they enjoy their independence too much to be influenced by government and politics. The local groups can lobby on local issues but it's not centralised like elsewhere.

SP: We have the problem of litigation. Like in the American system if you do something wrong, then it can cost the firm responsible a lot of money, and the government shoulders some of that risk when you register a limited company and they demand you are insured. I suspect it's the same here. The buck stops with the architect. But I think we tend to pass risk around like a hot potato among the design team. Since the government underwrites us, then they also somehow have stake in the things we do and want to regulate and legislate. It makes sense, but in education it's slightly different. It is a very lucrative market but with very little risk in real terms and yet we find it highly regulated through certain agencies, some based in Europe. I'm interested in the most basic comparison here. How are the schools in Switzerland regulated, and if they regulate themselves who decides what's right?

BC: The courses are regulated by a board made up of the heads of school and there is healthy competition between the schools which assures quality and top staff. There are also new schools emerging like Liechtenstein for instance, in Vaduz, and Winterthur, they have to make an effort in order to stay attractive. What makes them attractive is the choice of lecturers and professors who are often engaged in practice at a high level. In those smaller schools there aren't many professors (not as permanent employees) – there are mostly lecturers, (Fachhochschule ZHAW) because the professors are too expensive. Our lecturers have their contracts issued on a year-to-year basis. At the ETH it's slightly different. They have longer contracts and life professorships. But there are always new guest professors coming for two or three years and they tend to challenge to the established professors. A professor in Switzerland has to perform because otherwise he will be replaced by someone better. That mixes things up in a positive way. I think that's basically quite a good system.

SP: But this goes back to the beginning of the discussion, which was about looking at whether we should be training for a job/vocational or whether education should to some extent be free from this and be concerned with knowledge and scholarship. Another aspect is the emphasis – some might say the overemphasis on the design project as the main means to learn about architecture. This is a bit polemical but is it necessary to spend five years repeating the same design exercises in order to understand the tenets of architecture. Is it not simply something one could study?

BC: I think there have always been two sides to architectural training. Design focuses on testing proposals in terms of theory and the more artistic subjects. The other side deals with the execution of the building and the costs etc. You can't really have one without the other. That's why architectural education is so distinct. It's a practical art. Somewhere along the line the study of cost became secondary in schools and the design studio became more prominent. Star architects that go over budget and charge extraordinarily high fees do not help either. I'm not saying that the end product isn't beautiful, but it puts a lot of pressure on the normal architect who then won't be trusted to work

within the economy of means. You have to be educated in this aspect to be able to keep track of the changing costs, just like you have to be educated to design, plan cities, building technique and so on. So it's an extremely wide range that has to be cut into bits. The way it is now we have people that come from the schools that aren't really good enough in any of those categories. That's a big concern in my eyes.

SP: The schools are going to be under more pressure from the market. Then it will be more difficult to do everything. And maybe there won't be as much time. We are already hearing rumours that they want to shorten the time for studies to four years (and maybe shorter in the future). Then there might be an obligation for the Profession to do part of the educating. Do you think this could be problematic – splitting the education of the student between the profession and more academic subjects (almost like the old day release or part time courses in the UK)?

BC: No, I wouldn't recommend that because it would be something between practice and study. Young offices especially depend on the help of students who do internships or work while they are studying. It is a good reciprocal situation. Some of the students that worked with me have started their own office and because of their training here are able to deal with issues much better. So yes, there would be benefits to doing it that way, but our situation was less formal. I think that a school and practice association should definitely be a part of every architects training. They could be more related in my opinion, but they should stay additive constituents.

SP: I think there could be a problem with the PR of architecture. The students approach it with a specific idea of what architecture is. Then somehow you have to live up to the expectations. But the fantasy of architecture looks very different to the reality. If students were informed about the reality from the beginning it might put them off, but then again the ones that stayed would make good architects and there would definitely be fewer of them in the schools, which would stop the inflation of the job market.

BC: That's true. Over my teaching experience I met students who seem to just want to study something. In these cases I didn't really know if they actually wanted to be architects or if they were just doing it because it sounds good. With some you could feel the willingness to learn something. But even there you could make out two different types. Ones that are interested in architecture, who care, enunciate, convert and develop their wishes... and then there's the others who are just there to do it without really wanting to understand things deeply. But as for the PR, many other professions have the same problem. We have worked hard here in the North-East to create successful forums for architects. They are like local chapters that organise exhibitions and talks and so on. I think that these efforts are also important to form a more realistic representation of the profession locally. I hope that has answered some of your questions.