

Architecture and Education I Interview 6

Jonathan Sergison I October 2012

Samuel Penn: Having practised and taught architecture in London for over 18 years you have relatively recently decided to live and work in Switzerland. Can we start the discussion by comparing practice and teaching in the UK and Switzerland – focusing on the attitudes rather than the structural differences?

Jonathan Sergison: It is quite difficult to address this question without talking about structural differences. The organisation of practice and teaching in these two very different architectural cultures has emerged in relation to attitudes that exist more deeply within society. These have, to a greater or lesser extent, national characteristics. In the case of Switzerland there is a long established and highly valued democratic system that involves the populace in decision-making in a way that would be inconceivable in the political structures that exists in the UK. It is this collective decision-making that I identify as being highly significant in the structural organisation of a school like ETH Zurich, where a great deal of care and consideration has been given to the manner in which architectural education is managed. We discussed yesterday evening (at the Salon Suisse panel discussion) a difficulty that exists in the architectural education system in the UK, and one that is most marked in London schools. All too often the brightest recent graduates are invited to teach in the school they have just left. This is because they are willing to accept the poor financial terms they are offered. The problem with this is that it does not ensure that these teachers have time to acquire the experience or the education that being involved in the practice of building results in. As a result all they can draw upon is their academic experience, which is often rather rarefied. This does not really take things forward and, more disturbingly, tends to engender an anti-building culture. In Switzerland the experience is fundamentally different. You simply would not be invited to teach design in one of the three federal schools of architecture, Hochschule or Fachhochschule (the technical schools offering vocational training) without having a significant and established position as an architect in practice. This is a much more continental European model. Here I am talking about a post that would hold the title of 'Professor', which does not exactly equate with what we understand by this title in the UK. What is important in the Swiss model is the recognition that a professor needs help. It is clearly not possible to maintain a strong role in practice and hold an academic chair at the same time. Within this model, professors appoint a number of assistants to help with the task of teaching and organisation in general. Very often assistants are young architects who have been out of school for a few years and who may have already been in practice themselves, or are working for a practice that can spare them for a few days a week. While it is understood that they do not have enough experience to set a teaching programme, their exposure to the teaching practice of a more mature teacher can lead to this being a possibility in the future. The salary they receive in turn allows a young practice to undertake competitions and develop an individual position. In principle, I can only see practical advantages in the structure of this system from all points of view.

SP: This is something you talked about yesterday - your own experience in learning how to teach in the UK.

JS: Yes that is right. A few years after I had left the Architectural Association I was invited by Micha Bandini to join her in the studio she was running at the University of North London. She was the head of the school at the time. Micha recognised that, while I might be interested in teaching in the future, I had no teaching experience. The position she offered me was based on her need to be supported, and in return she gave me an opportunity to learn how to teach. Looking back, I owe Micha a great deal of thanks because she did just that. From her, I learnt an approach to teaching that most people in the UK would never receive. In the end it is the students that suffer from the absence of a clear structure that ensures that teachers learn how to teach. Of course, in time you work things out, but to expect someone in their late twenties to do this with no support from the school is optimistic at best. I would say that it is irresponsible. It should also be noted that while Florian Beigel was already teaching at the University of North London at the time, it was Micha Bandini who brought into the school a number of younger teachers whose attitude to studio teaching made a remarkable impression. It was certainly a point of exchange and meeting for what might now be understood as 'the London school'. But taking a step back in terms of the question about my own experience, teaching at the University of North London, East London and later at the AA was undoubtedly a formative experience. It was also full of challenges and difficulties. I cannot say that Stephen and I entirely enjoyed the experience of teaching at the AA. I am now able to compare it to the conditions we encountered when we were invited to teach in Zurich ten years ago. Quite quickly we realised how problematic the situation was in London. The need to introduce your teaching programme at the beginning of the year

had an understandable logic, but the reality was that it was treated as a theatrical event that was more to do with performance than with the presentation of a serious architectural position. We made the mistake of telling the students that they would have to work hard and that we were interested in buildings. For the students this was a very unappealing declaration to make. At the end of the year we encountered another point of conflict when our colleagues joined us to assess the work of the students. Again, criticism is understandable, but instead of being expressed in a reasonable and informed discussion, it resulted in a rather partisan conflict where our position was very much at odds with the dominant, anti-building culture that was in ascendancy in the school. As a result of this we suffered, but the students suffered more. We were happy to leave, and to the best of my knowledge the situation is still very much the same to this day. When we first came to Switzerland we encountered none of these difficulties. We had been invited to teach at ETH as practising architects and were respected by our colleagues for the things we had built and because our commitment to teaching was known. The question everyone is most interested in is the contribution someone can make to the school. Given that the people who run the school had formed the view that we should be there, it is also understandable that they should offer their support and not create obstacles to the task at hand, that of teaching students in a relevant and appropriate manner. At ETH the teaching programme is announced by publishing a written notice on the school website. It was not necessary to make any other form of presentation. At the end of the semester the students' work is assessed by the professors who teach them and their judgement is respected.

SP: Well this is the crux of the matter. They spend a lot of time making sure they get the right people for the job. But there isn't a great deal of structural difference between the ETH or Mendrisio and our system in the UK.

JS: I would say yes and no. In many ways the structure of the course is similar; its annual duration and the number of years of study, the need to take a year out and so on. The key difference lies in an attitude to how the subject is taught. In the UK there is a greater emphasis on a rather liberal attitude. Students are encouraged to experiment and follow their own creative impulses. This leads to a great sense of self-belief. In Switzerland, the first priority is to instil knowledge of the discipline of architecture and to develop an understanding of history and theory, and familiarity with technical aspects of the subject. Armed with knowledge rather than only intuitive impulse, a student is in a better position to begin to explore their own architectural interests. And, again, it should be emphasised that the people who teach them have a great deal of experience and expertise. From my point of view, the big scandal is that students in the UK are now being asked to pay £9,000 a year for a frankly inferior education. In Switzerland schools of architecture charge a fraction of this. If not for the obstacle of language I can imagine many of the brightest and most motivated UK students finding their way into Swiss schools in future. It is already beginning to happen, although it is a trickle rather than a flood at this moment in time.

SP: So do you see any solutions for us, or will there just be an exodus away from the UK?

JS: Well, it would be a rather gloomy conclusion to say that there is no hope and that I have given up on the possibility that things could ever get better. Personally, I think that there are too many schools of architecture and too many students studying the subject. While I think the study of architecture is potentially a broad subject that lends itself to careers that are not directly connected to architectural practice, there have to be reasonable limits on how open the course is. Yesterday, visiting the Venice Biennale I was struck by the incredible number of students everywhere. While it is wonderful to see so much youthful interest, I am left wondering what will become of them all. Maybe it has been like this for some time. In my opinion universities in the UK have become too focused on their financial structure and their ability to raise money. Education should be better funded by central government. It is an old argument, but as is the case more widely, long and short-term costs and benefits must be assessed. A well-educated society is surely a good investment. But if I have learnt a lesson from the experience of teaching in Switzerland it is that architectural education needs to be useful. Most young architects that have passed through ETH Zurich and now hold a diploma are primed and ready for practice. Of course, they still have much to learn but can do this by building upon a good foundation. In my experience of employing people that have come through architectural schooling in the UK there is a lot that needs to be undone first.

SP: I'd like to shift the discussion to what we started to talk about yesterday – the importance of history both in practice and education. I'd specifically like to explore the teaching of architectural history – by that I mean the standard lecture course – and the emergence of a more operative use of history in the design studio. Do you see this as a problem?

JS: As you know, I think the teaching of architectural history is important. I believe this more and more. I do not believe that it is possible to practice architecture without acquiring some knowledge of history and taking it into account in our work. In my first three years of architectural education at the Canterbury school of architecture I received a reasonably good, albeit elementary, understanding of the history of architecture. Certainly better than anything I later received at the AA, where I encountered a degree of ambivalence to this aspect of my architectural education. We were expected to be self-motivated and attend the lectures that appealed to us. But it was clear that the design studio was where the action was, and while my unit master encouraged us to understand architectural history and theory, this was the exception rather than the norm. It took me quite some time to question the essentially modernist education I received, with its implicit denial of the past and embracing of the present. Like many architectural students that originate from the north of Europe, my impulse was to travel south and to witness at first hand the architectural heritage of Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal. While I was not conscious that this was what I was doing when I was in my late teens and early twenties, I was exposing myself to classical culture and to the fundamentals of architectural history. Bit by bit things fall into place and the usefulness of architectural history has become apparent, as a reference in our discussions and in the way we make projects. I think Stephen has had a similar journey, not exactly the same, but a parallel one. When I was in my second year of architectural studies, I visited a house by Palladio in the Italian countryside. I remember being moved, but it has taken many years and a lot of experience to know how something that is 500 years old can be relevant to me today. This has nothing to do with what one might understand as an academic relationship to things and everything to do with emotion, the feeling something evokes, its spatial configuration and so on. And one of the fringe benefits of constantly travelling as much as I do as a result of working, teaching and lecturing in many different places, is that I am exposed to European building culture. For this I am very grateful. Everything I see can hold a lesson if I am receptive to it, and it also means that I am always looking with curiosity. There is another aspect of your question that I would like to touch on: the tension that exists between those that teach design in a studio system and those that are responsible for teaching the history and theory of architecture. I find this separation unfortunate, but also recognise that the structure of most schools contributes to a condition of mutual exclusivity rather than coherence. I try and foster a curiosity towards architectural history and a theoretical understanding in my students, which seems obvious and is entirely consistent with how architecture was taught until the canon of International Modernisms challenged this view. This semester my studio is working in the city of Naples. When we went on a study trip, we devoted a lot of time to walking through the city and invited local experts to describe its history and the manner in which it exists as an urban condition. One day we made a bus trip to Paestum, Herculaneum and the Villa Poppea. These are all incredible sites and, unlike many archaeological ruins, can still be experienced as spatial encounters. Coming back to the question of educational models and my approach to teaching, I think the most important thing for students is to begin to develop a position. I know this takes a long time and I am more interested in this, than in a 'studio style'. I take a lot of responsibility for the structure of the course. A semester is short and I know that it is better if we can be precise in terms of what a student is working on from one week to the next. I could be accused of being overly prescriptive, but in Switzerland I don't think students mind having a strict framework in which to organise their work. And when I see the results I cannot imagine operating in another way. At the moment the studio is exploring ideas of low-rise, high-density housing in relation to the contemporary European city. The study will carry on through a number of semesters. We started with central London, followed by Zurich and Naples. Next semester we will travel to Bucharest and so on. When we go on studio trips to cities, one of the things we ask the students to do is to make a careful survey of a group of buildings, a single building or a fragment of one. I believe that this will prove a valuable exercise in the subsequent development of the students' projects. This study should be instructive and provide a point of reference, a way of understanding how things are made, the scale and proportion of building elements etc. We also place strong emphasis on model making. There is a strong culture of model making in our school and I see this as a vital activity. There are times when we prioritise the development of facades over plans. I know it takes a lot of experience to make a convincing facade for a building. We are interested in the atmosphere a building holds and the manner in which it integrates within a city context. There are also other occasions where priority is given to the plan. When I think about the Swiss competition system I realise how much emphasis is given to the qualities of a plan and the way it is organised. In housing competitions it seems that 70% of the jury's discussion revolves around this issue.

SP: The Swiss still have a lively competition system. There is a healthy stewardship in the profession that aims to guarantee chances for young practices.

JS: Yes, the competition system is organised in a very practical way. There are certain instances where the competition is organised in a single stage and open. This usually occurs when it is felt that the scale and complexity of the project would allow a young architect to realise the building. Of course there is no guarantee that a young practice will win, but at least they have a chance. There are also two stage competitions based upon expressions of interest. This model is usually preferred where the scale and complexity of the project requires more experience and, when expressing interest, a practice needs to demonstrate the capacity and experience necessary to realise a building of comparable complexity. Finally there is another competition system that is being increasingly employed, which is a variant of the two-stage model, where each team is asked to present their project at a number of stages, and receive feedback from the jury and have the opportunity to adjust their work accordingly. The advantage this approach has is that the client body is able to get to know the different teams and the way they work. Instead of investing three months' work in a certain direction, the architects find out after a month whether their concept is appropriate. As an office, we favour this approach. The only disadvantage with the Swiss system is that the level of competition is generally very high. The strong presence of architects on the jury, usually very good ones, means that we are always sure that the discussion has been thorough and we respect the decision, even when it does not work in our favour. We have stopped looking at competitions that are run by the RIBA. The conditions are so poor at every level and we really feel it is not worth wasting our time on them. It has been this way for about ten years or so. I remember a time when RIBA competitions produced interesting results. They were generally organised as open competitions that were well judged. Many successful and established practices benefited from this situation. Today it is rare to find an open competition where there is a serious intention to build the winning entry. Instead priority is given to a two-stage structure where architectural practices need to demonstrate experience in building the kind of programme required by the competition. If the competition is for a school, one needs to show numerous examples of schools one has already built; if it is for a library, one needs to demonstrate expertise in building libraries, and so on. The argument in support of this approach is based on the need to protect clients from having to deal with a young studio that might win a competition but would lack the experience to realise it. This is a reasonable concern, although one can also think of many young offices who have won a big competition, built it and gone on to complete more great works. My difficulty with this lies partly with the inflexibility of the stance recently taken by the RIBA competitions department which has resulted in the total exclusion of younger offices from the opportunity to take part in the competition process. The more specific and pragmatic system adopted in Switzerland seems a much better model. No two competitions are ever the same and each case should be considered on its own terms. Currently, it seems to me that a younger generation of architects are being denied the opportunity to enter anything other than 'ideas' competitions. While competitions require time, energy and resources, they are welcomed by architects as a way of winning work, but also for the creative freedom they allow, which direct commissions do not so readily afford. Younger architect might lack experience but they often offer new insights and a degree of experimentation. Right now in the UK one can see the same established architects churning out the same sort of work in an unchallenged and uncritical manner. Another factor in the structure of a competition is the composition of the jury. In the past, when I have been invited to contribute to competition juries, I have taken my primary role as that of explaining to the client body the merits and shortcomings of the various entries and assisting them in developing an understanding of what solution had the most merit. This does not mean imposing my will and burdening the client with something they do not wish for. It is a great responsibility, and the situation is clearly improved if there is an equal split between experienced professionals and client representatives in the jury. In the UK the architectural presence is often a single solitary voice and, more often than not, a rather weak one at that. This means that even if you are selected (and in 12 years we have never been) your position cannot be relied on. As it costs our office a lot of money to produce a competition entry, we need to take a strategic approach to how we use our time and resources.

SP: So this was not always the case?

JS: It was not. It makes me wonder why architects in the UK accept how bad the situation is. I don't think that we are alone in thinking this.

SP: Yesterday we began talking about style and taste as a formative force in architectural practice. After the war here in Italy, characters like Mollino, Moretti and Caccia Dominioni, who recognised the importance of 'gusto' (taste) in their work, saw it as a deeply common or shared aspect of society and therefore an important factor in the creation of culture. But since then this discussion has disappeared.

JS: It seems to have faded, but one recent development that gives me some hope is the emergence of the journal *San Rocco*. It seems like a breath of fresh air after so many years of difficulty. Much as I admire figures like Rossi and Gregotti, they do seem to have operated in a manner that has stifled the emergence of a younger generation. This situation is not unique to Italy, but I do believe that they are in part responsible for the loss of the incredible architecture culture that existed in the Fifties and Sixties. We find ourselves drawn to the examples of work produced in those decades. It seems remarkably fresh, inventive and still relevant today, and I am happy that it is now being reappraised and reinterpreted by a younger generation of Italian architects. When Stephen and I began working together we were able to devote more time to discussion and to speculating on the form of practice we wanted to have. A set of values and the position we hold emerged out of this. In our conversations we often referred to Alison and Peter Smithson and to the example their way of working offered. We have always found their written work to be very inspiring, but 15 years ago we were particularly drawn to their use of notions of 'the everyday', 'as found' and to their study and acceptance of the qualities that can be discovered in things as they exist. In many ways our interest in these concepts has endured, although in time and through the experience of building we have come to focus not on recreating the characteristics of things that exist, but on the process of interpreting them. Returning to your question about the management of taste and style, it is something we are interested in. 'Style' is a word we avoid, but the feeling a building might create and an attitude to proportion is very present in our discussions. We want our work to feel well judged and rigorous, although there have been occasions when we have deliberately used a degree of awkwardness and ugliness.. We hold in very high regard the architects you referred to, along with many other Italian architects who were active in the 1950s and 60s. Through my involvement with teaching in the Italian-speaking world I have enjoyed having greater access to this production. The invention and originality of their work is very inspiring. Nothing like it existed before. And although aspirations to originality per se may be seen as problematic, I am not sure these architects actually realised that originality is exactly what they achieved.