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Architectural education in the UK is about to enter a period of substantial change and realignment. This compelling and meaningful book charts the processes that have led to this position, discusses the implications of this for the profession, before exploring possible methods of and developments for architectural education in the twenty-first century.

Sally Stone, Manchester School of Architecture

Find an architecture school anywhere in the world, and you are pretty much guaranteed to find an architect telling us what is wrong with it; but as Marx would have it, the point surely is to change it. This iconoclastic collection of dissenting essays manages both to expose the historical shortcomings of architectural education but also to propose provocative but plausible alternatives for its future. It will undoubtedly help to shape this vitally important debate in a period of profound uncertainty for both the profession and for its pedagogical underpinnings.

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Architectural education, and the British Tradition

Froud & Harriss

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PROFESSOR DAVID GLOSTER

‘Sensuous frontline existence is there, hateful and repellent, unforgettable and inescapable...’

Perplexingly, the education of students to join a profession that is often regarded with envy by those on the outside is, in fact, grounded in conflict. Some readers will, however, be used to the idea that architecture education is a scene of instruction against which sacrifice has to be made; the axiom that ‘if it doesn’t kill you, then you’re no good’. All those participating in the teaching of architecture should recognise this truth without feeling satisfied in making such acknowledgement.

The condition of instability - a word fundamental to the book’s ethos - is not one many people feel comfortable with. A queasy sense of imbalance and uncertainty, few absolute values, and no guarantees of anything other than an even more dubious future are what the majority of us avoid in life and work. But this is architecture we’re talking about. Imbalance and ambiguity richly oxygenate debate of the subject in Britain, providing the fuel for those scenes of white-knuckled, temple-popping disagreement schools host under the dignifying banner of the design jury.

This introduction will not question whether such delicate and improbable structures for criticism of The Project remain appropriate to an environment in which students now accumulate six-figure debts. Instead, it celebrates those intellectually restless environments created by schools of architecture to reinvent the discipline (often in less time than the mainstream profession can pronounce ‘improved procurement routes’). This is scholarship executed under combat conditions, against the punishing deadlines of the semester system. It bears little resemblance to research and enquiry in almost any other academic discipline; this is in itself an achievement.

The unique milieu of British architecture education is surely taken for granted, meaning this book had to be written. We need a marker set and published before ruthless commodification in the global economy reduces the entire built environment to the vocabulary of house builders. Our curiosity thirsts for evaluation of the UK’s alterity in architectural education, and how the occasional detachment of this from practice may actually have enhanced the progressive professional reputation of UK practitioners (as well as their profitability). We should revel in the way radical pedagogies developed in the vagabond academia of UK
“What we need to nurture is a constant, knowing and wary negotiation of complicity with resistance; a negotiation between the physical nature of objects of production, versus the temporal acts of social and political agency.”
Illustrating the range of subjects in the practical and applied arts curriculum

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Students studying drawing
He identifies the problem as the education of the architect. Over 40 years later, Leon van Schaik echoes this: ‘Architecture was professionalised around the wrong body of knowledge: one unrelated specifically to any of the basic human intelligences, but rather related to a broad amalgam of capabilities that can be seen to underpin aspects of construction engineering, building and technical drafting. The crucial key to being a profession – custody of a body of knowledge – was thus never secured for architecture.’69 (It seems that distance from the ‘practical arts’ has created a dislocation between the technical and political domains of architecture’s operation.)

TRACING CRITICAL PRACTICE – A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ART SCHOOL

The contemporary art school’s origins lie in the 19th century, when the state began to intervene in the education of artists and designers. Public art education was driven through parliament by radical Whig politicians as part of economic necessity and a campaign for ‘useful knowledge’. The establishment in 1837 of the ‘Normal School of Design’ in 1837, at Somerset House, was quickly followed by other Schools of Design around Britain. These enshrined a philosophy of ‘utilitarianism’ in service to the emerging industrial age; a casting off of the academies concern for ‘styles’. Although still based on a pedagogy of imitation, the Schools of Design employed a ‘training’ approach to deliver specific disciplinary skills, not dissimilar to the way in which traditional crafts were taught in medieval guilds, but attuned to the needs of contemporary manufacturing.

The ensuing proliferation of public art schools eventually included the Central School of Art (1896) under Lethaby, established by the London County Council. Walter Muthesius, the founder of the German Werkbunds, called the Central School ‘probably one of the best organised contemporary art schools’.70 Although a radical pedagogue for his times, Lethaby’s establishment of the Central School straddled only the very beginnings of a seismic shift in approaches to art and design education, marked by even more radical responses to industrialisation.71

The first integration of art and design education with the needs of machine production was implemented from 1919 at the Weimar Bauhaus under Walter Gropius. The ‘Basic’ Course in Design at the Bauhaus, initiated by Johannes Itten, was soon to have an enormous effect on British art school education, and was further explored and developed by artists and educators nationwide, including Victor Pasmore, Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton at the Central School in the 1950s, accelerated by support from the ICA with exhibitions such as ‘Growth and Form’ (1951). In the ‘basic’ course approach lie the origins of criticality. It was intended to ‘liberate students from second hand traditional information and to make them learn basic principles from direct analyses and their own direct experience.’72 This was radically different to the skills- and training-based approaches of the Schools of Design, encompassing, as it did, burgeoning interests in child art and psychology. As Herbert Read wrote in his influential book Education through Art in 1943: ‘the general purpose of
Introducing a menu of divergent strategies into the curriculum would enable students, tutors and practitioners to participate in alternative discourses, roaming without getting lost.
Those that drop out should perhaps be
more formally recognized for their vital roles
in future life and building, and by extension,
help us cultivate a more diverse and mythical
culture, and therefore a more significant and
tactile understanding of better authorship,
more fully informed by their virtual lives.

Every culture and building, by and large, at least, is
perhaps more formally recognized for their vital roles,
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