

Architectural Education for Global Markets: An Argument for Humility and Empathy

KEVIN MITCHELL
American University of Sharjah

Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself at all. -William Temple

In *The "True Professional Ideal" in America: A History*, Bruce Kimball traces six "moments" representing changes in the usage of the term "profession" and its cognates.¹ Kimball claims that "profession" originally referred to a religious vow and, over time, the term was extended to denote the group who had taken the vow, namely the "secular" clergy. After a series of transformations in usage, "profession" came to refer to a vocation in the early twentieth century. Addressing the transformation of occupations into professions in *The Acquisitive Society*, Richard Tawney stressed a mode of control that represented an emphasis on collegial discipline and a degree of independence from clients and market forces.²

Building on the work of Kimball and Tawney, Michael Curry has argued that modern-day professions have relied on both metaphorical and non-metaphorical spaces to establish a position outside of "everyday self-interest".³ While the metaphorical spaces allow for control of the occupation and collective resistance to market forces, non-metaphorical spaces are constructed to provide a physical space in which the profession is practiced and protected. For example, Curry mentions the attorney who has the law office and the courtroom and the physician who has the hospital and the clinic. The architect is conspicuously absent in Curry's schema.

If it exists, legislation governing use of the designation "architect" ensures a degree of collective resistance and collegial control; however, no non-

metaphorical space such as the courtroom or clinic provides a place in which professional activity is carried out in isolation. Once out of the rarefied atmosphere of the design studio, architects are subject to and must contend with market forces that converge rather forcefully on a construction site. And matters are complicated when operating within diverse socio-cultural contexts. As practices seek to extend their activities beyond the confines of national borders, the non-metaphorical spaces in which architects build will present challenges to the profession and to education.

Should architectural education adapt? An initial response would be to answer no. There are many examples of successful projects designed by architects of previous generations who operated in contexts that could be considered "foreign". If one takes the Aga Khan Award for Architecture as a case study, it is clear that some architects have been quite capable of adapting their professional experience to unfamiliar socio-cultural contexts and climatic conditions. It is unlikely that many of the North American and European architects who were nominated for and/or received recognition were educated according to curricula that emphasized the international dimensions of practice. However, it is likely that personal and educational experiences of those responsible for the projects facilitated the ability to transcend potential limitations and respond to contextual concerns with sensitivity and intelligence.

But, after considering the recent proliferation of buildings designed by practices operating outside their home countries and the rather dismal rate of success as measured by responsiveness to specific locales, it seems that architectural education must bear some level of responsibility and

address the situation. The sheer scale and complexity of projects being carried out in established and emerging economies require that students at least gain exposure to the skills and abilities required to successfully provide design services in a global market.

This essay considers some of the challenges and discusses issues that could be considered in developing curricula that responds to preparation for practice within international contexts. Rather than offering prescriptive suggestions for a set of specific courses or changes to curricular structures, the essay argues for approaches to teaching that facilitate the development of humility and empathy.

HUMILITY

As mentioned in the introduction, architects must necessarily operate in non-metaphorical spaces that are subject to a variety of competing market forces. Without the benefit of an actual space such as the attorney's courtroom or the physician's clinic, architects must depend upon a metaphorical mental space within which to consider the implications of their activities. The educational experience of architecture students should offer possibilities for engaging questions that will challenge preconceptions and make them more self-conscious of how they approach other contexts and cultures.

In Harvard University's *Report of the Task Force on General Education*, the authors state that the aim of liberal education should be "... to unsettle presumptions, to defamiliarize the familiar, to reveal what is going on beneath and behind appearances, to disorient young people and to help them find ways to re-orient themselves. A liberal education aims to accomplish these things by questioning assumptions, by inducing self-reflection, by teaching students to think critically and analytically, by exposing them to the sense of alienation produced by encounters with radically different historical moments and cultural formations and with phenomena that exceed their, and even our own, capacity to fully understand."⁴

While studio-based curricula often engage students in processes of defamiliarization, the ability to consider questions that are not immediately relevant to the design challenge is often limited by scope or time. Any program that claims to pre-

pare students for the challenges resulting from international practice would be hard pressed to provide proof without demonstrating a strong liberal arts component that demands encounters with divergent world views. Although collaboration with faculty colleagues in the humanities and social sciences is valuable, students must also recognize the value of disciplinary autonomy and be confronted with other cohesive and coherent frameworks for understanding the world – they will certainly be confronted with other worldviews in multinational practice.

One could certainly envision collaboration in which architects and sociologists offered courses to architecture students in order to broaden their understanding of the built environment; if not done carefully, it could reinforce an architecture student's presumption that all questions must be made immediately relevant to their concerns as an "Architect" with the dreaded capital "A". It is perhaps more productive to engage students as a conduit, i.e. rather than being lectured to they should be listened to. One could imagine a scenario in which the knowledge gained in courses across the university could be shared and discussed in a studio setting. Conversations about how this may relate to architecture (or may not immediately relate but reveals disciplinary prejudices and serve to enhance our understanding of the world) could enrich the studio.

Engaging in practices that are international in scope will require the ability for self-reflection and the humility that should result from questioning basic assumptions. Louis Menand, who co-chaired the committee responsible for Harvard University's *Report of the Task Force on General Education*, wrote in the *New Yorker*: "We want to give our graduates confidence to face the world, but we also want to protect the world a little from their confidence. Humility is good. There is not enough of it these days."⁵ Architectural education fosters a competitiveness that depends on developing (and consistently demonstrating) confidence. Ultimately this confidence is necessary – in the most constructive manifestations, it provides the security necessary to be self-critical rather than a shield to retreat behind when confronted with the unfamiliar.

Courses offerings in architecture with "humility" in the title would certainly be undersubscribed.

But, especially for those that will engage in practices that are international in scope, confidence tempered with humility will be a valuable asset. Humility, as its etymological root *humus* suggests, relates to the ground; true humility demands a grounding that results from self-knowledge that transcends self-interest. When attempting to communicate across cultures, humility will be vital for those who wish to be understood.

EMPATHY

While reflection can provide a foundation for relating to the unfamiliar, it may not necessarily result in responses that could be described as empathetic. This requires transcending formulations and categories that facilitate understanding through processes of abstraction (which requires a critical distance). As an architect or designer, it is not enough to be sympathetic – Being sympathetic does not necessarily require engagement. Positive contributions in the form of architecture require a greater degree of involvement by those who are empathetic and therefore able to apprehend and respond to feelings, whether individual or collective. While reflection may lead to self-understanding, empathy results from a process of self-forgetting. Empathy can exist when one is able to transcend narrow individual concerns.

While the literature related to empathy in the medical professions is significant, there is little discussion on the role of empathy within architecture. Defining empathy in relation to architectural education is difficult; nevertheless it is important to look for instances within curricula where it can be discussed and made clear through concrete examples. One of the most obvious examples would be community-based service-learning opportunities that demand direct involvement in diverse socio-cultural contexts. Another area of the curriculum in which the notion of empathy could be addressed is in courses that deal with the forces that structure contemporary international practices. Questions could focus on the problematic nature of defining “success” when operating in an international context and addressing issues related to professional ethics and modes of practice.

With regard to the question of ethics, many practices operating in emerging economies are confronted with questions related to issues such as

labor abuses in the construction industry. In November 2006, *Human Rights Watch* published a report entitled *Building Towers, Cheating Workers: Exploitation of Migrant Construction Workers in the United Arab Emirates*.⁶ Almost a year later, a news summary in *Architectural Record* addressed the issue of labor abuses in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁷ Hadi Ghaemi authored of the Human Rights Watch report; when interviewed by *Architectural Record*, he claimed that in spite of the fact that architecture firms in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are not involved in matters related to labor, they should nevertheless consider themselves complicit in abuses. Most of the North American-based firms with major projects in the UAE declined to comment. The summary concluded that without a push for reform or pressure on construction companies, there would be little change. This particular issue challenges the role of collective resistance made possible by professional bodies or organizations. Market forces are often much stronger than matters of conscience.

While the *Report of the Task Force on General Education* mentioned earlier is a commendable effort, an opinion in the student-run *Harvard Crimson* advocated the addition of an area of inquiry titled “The Market and Society”. According to the editorial team, “Beyond basic comprehension and citizenship, markets profoundly affect our daily lives. Whether we are shocked to find no tomatoes in our dining halls or are writing a paper on a computer made in China, it has become impossible to escape market forces. Economic factors also affect our major life decisions, including deciding where we live, what we do, how much education we get, and what our standard of living is. Given the importance of markets, we think it is critical that a Harvard graduate have both an understanding of how they work and an understanding of their failures and shortcomings.”⁸

Coursework that examined labor-related issues in the construction sector in emerging economies could benefit architecture students by addressing the inherent complexity of the situation. While the initial reaction of condemnation is certainly warranted, it often stands in the way of developing a more comprehensive understanding that results from examining global labor migration patterns, their root causes and their impact on the practice and production of architecture. In-depth examinations of the forces that result in labor migration



Fig. 1. Market Forcefulness. A scene from Dubai's *Cityscape*, an annual real estate marketing event that aims to transform foreign direct investment into iconic statements.

may not only allow future architects to comment on the issue but to develop strategies for addressing the challenges through collective resistance and empathetic engagement.

Empathy can be understood as the capacity to understand another person's experience within that person's frame of reference. Applied to architecture and urban design, empathetic approaches would demand seeking to understand spatial and formal structures "from the inside", or rather from the point of view of those who will inhabit and use the spaces and places that are created. This is not intended to imply a naïve acceptance of "traditional" typologies but a critical interrogation of built form to determine the reasons for its structure and the meaning it embodies. Without a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the contexts, architecture risks reduction to scenographic statements devoid of significance.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan states "An object or place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind. Long residences enable

us to know a place intimately yet its image may lack sharpness unless we can also see it from the outside and reflect upon our experience. Another place may lack the weight of reality because we know it only from the outside – through the eyes as a tourist, and from reading about it in a guide-book."⁹ Unfortunately in many cases international practices have approached projects by looking at the context with the eyes of a tourist. Places are sometimes reduced to a series of digital photographs that reside on an office's server. Many of those working on "foreign" projects substitute presumptions for the total experience that results from critically reflecting on intimate knowledge of the complexities that characterize a particular place.¹⁰

In a number of emerging economies, those who commission architecture require buildings that should encourage investment. Speculation supports growth in the real estate and construction industries, resulting in the need for visually arresting icons that attract the attention of investors. It is interesting to consider the etymology of the term speculation in this context as it articulates the ever-increasing role of the visual. The Latin root *spec* means to look. In Dubai and other places supporting rapid development, many real-estate transactions are based on nothing more than visual representations in the form of renderings. The material reality seems less important than the reality constructed from photorealistic images; the craft of making that is often absent in the building itself has been replaced by the artifice of highly skilled CAD technicians. In speculative markets, attracting the attention of potential investors is vital. In some cases, the quality exhibited in models and renderings is not always achieved in the buildings that they represent.

While digital technologies have allowed for formal invention freed from concerns related to climate and context, one wonders whether the focus on the iconic will affect the long-term competitiveness of North American students in the global market. As educators we decry the effects of late capitalism and neo-liberal economic forces on architecture, yet we perpetuate the emphasis of the iconic and defend it with jargon-laden talk that supposedly makes our cause more noble than that of the profit-driven search for the outrageous. While some emerging economies have relied on the production of iconic buildings to attract for-



Fig. 2. Shopping.

eign direct investment (FDI) and fuel real estate sales, there is an increasing recognition that the problems associated with rapid urbanization will negatively affect developing regions.¹¹ There is also the concern that students' facility with digital technology encourages an emphasis on the visual at the expense of mastering design fundamentals which, I would argue, will be vital for those attempting to understand the built environment in unfamiliar contexts.

Architectural education should maintain the focus on design – even if design may not be the focus of many students after graduation. In addition to the basic formal and spatial understanding that a studio-centric education will provide, the cognitive abilities to resolve design problems are transferable. But a focus on design should not prohibit other emphases, such as the development of knowledge and skills that will allow students to make sense of environments that are unknown. Experiences that encourage the development of a self-understanding can allow students to understand particular socio-cultural contexts in a critical manner with the intention of active engagement.

Existing curricular models present many opportunities for facilitating the capacity for self-reflection. To adjust credit hour requirements or to demand a course in "International Practice" will not necessarily result in future practitioners that are

more humble or empathetic. In many instances, it is less about what we teach and more about how we teach it. Often we reinforce a limited view that extends only as far as national or disciplinary boundaries. The insularity is, on the one hand, induced by the general lack of awareness of the world at large and, on the other, encouraged by the demands of a focused professional education. The world is not quite as flat as we may think, and recognizing this is a first step toward tempering critical reflection with the humility and empathy required for transcending individual self-interest.

ENDNOTES

1. Bruce Kimball, *The "True Professional Ideal" in America: A History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).
2. Richard H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921).
3. Michael Curry, "The Fragmented Individual and the Academic Realm", In: P.C. Adams, S. Hoelscher and K.E. Till (eds) *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
4. *Report of the Task Force on General Education, Harvard University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2007).
5. Louis Menand, "Comment: The Graduates", *The New Yorker* (May 21, 2007), p. 28.
6. Human Rights Watch, *Building Towers, Cheating Workers: Exploitation of Migrant Construction Workers in the United Arab Emirates*, Volume 18, No. 8(E).
7. Sam Lubell, "Blood, Sand and Tears: Worker Abuse Alleged in the U.A.E.", *Architectural Record* (August 2007), pp. 33-34.
8. "The General Education Report should add "The Market and Society" as a Requirement" [Opinion], *The Harvard Crimson* (October 20, 2006).
9. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 18.
10. See Kevin Mitchell, "Lamenting the loss of a past constructed in the present: the case of Dubai", In: J. Al-Qawasmi, A. Mahmoud and A. Jerbi (eds) *Regional Architecture and Identity in the Age of Globalization* (Amman: CSAAR-Center for the Study of Architecture in the Arab Region, 2007), pp. 645-653.
11. For a discussion on the case of Dubai, see Kevin Mitchell, "Killing Time – Speculations on the Future Promise of Architecture in Dubai", In: A. Kanna (ed) *The Superlative City: Dubai and the Urban Condition in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).