

Sapere Aude!

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The majority of North American architecture schools exist within colleges or departments of public universities. Most of the rest belong to private universities. Very few exist as independent professional programs. In light of the historical differences between professional schools and public universities, is it relevant for today's programs to hold onto the history of their ideological difference? Phrased differently: is there a greater imperative for programs subsidized by the state to contribute back to the common interest of the public? From yet another perspective: considering the allegedly influential events of May 1968 on the educational landscape of North American architecture schools, should the historical if vain struggle of French architecture students to be annexed to the university serve to remind us of the advantages made available by Academia's acceptance of architecture as one of its disciplines? This paper aims to locate in a historical lineage some of the paradoxes found in North American education today, specifically the confusion between means and ends that derived from the welding of French literary theory to the vestiges of a bastardized Beaux-Arts model. In order to do so, it traces the separation back to 18th century France, where the fundamentally different ends between the technical training of professionals and the liberal education of citizens were explicitly formulated. By reiterating the purpose of education as defined by the thinkers of the Enlightenment, the following pages aim to caution against reducing the distance between the ends of architectural education and what should only be the means of getting there. They also serve to remind us that the

establishment of public instruction was an inherently political act, accentuating the "politicization of architectural education" as doubly pleonastic. In effect, far more energy has been spent over the past forty years on the de-politicization of education, architectural education and the consequent architecture profession than was ever spent on the polemical designs that, in the 70's, tried to shake the profession out of its blissful compliance.

2.0 EDUCATING FRANCE

"This supreme ruse of the system, that of the simulacrum of its death, through which it maintains us in life by having liquidated through absorption all possible negativity, only a superior ruse can stop".¹ Thus spoke Jean Baudrillard of the spiraling cadaver of the French University in the aftermath of May 68. Such unequivocal and defeatist prognostic annihilated the possibility of resistance: since restoration to a previous state was inconceivable, the only tenable program called for a public display of the rotting process. While seemingly vindictive, accelerating the decay of the university's remains could have fertilized the ground for a fresh start. Instead, the French educational system suffered through three more decades of successive reforms, increasingly frequent and inconsequent, maintaining on life support the specter of an educational system that would, by comparison, portray Baudrillard's cadaver as youthful and vigorous. The 1970's saw the emergence of a systematic "fuite des cerveaux" (brain drain) pattern, depleting the French university of its intellectual elite to the benefit of foreign institutions, particularly North American ones. But the focus of this paper is not on the current sad state of the French university. What

is being emphasized here is the fact that, despite its relatively disastrous state, the French university has concurrently been on the receiving end of a domestic “fuite des cerveaux”, one deserting the professional schools of architecture in favor of academic posts, for those qualified as researchers, leaving the instruction of future architects almost exclusively in the hands of professionals.² The two-fold observation this reveals will necessitate some historical scrutiny. First, the exclusion of professional schools from the university is indicative of a still prevailing reality: nowhere is the separation of theory and practice more deeply engrained than in the French education system. Second, the privileged cultural status accorded to thinking over making is as much a product of the education system as that system was once the product of deliberately instituted priorities. To recall the source of its intentions is to question the prevalence of these values today.

2.1 On Mechanical Arts vs. Liberal Arts

Aside from a decade —ending in 1892—during which professional schools were under the double tutelage of the Ministry of Public Instruction and that of Commerce, the Ministry of National Education, which oversees higher education, has never administered the schools of architecture. Indexing the fluctuations of the architects’ social standing between artist and engineer, the education of architects over the last century has been placed alternatively under the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture or under that of the Ministry of Equipment and Transportation, systematically excluding architecture students from the college student population under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education. Since 1995, the Ministry of Culture and Communication has inherited the pedagogical direction of architectural education while the Ministry of Equipment has been renamed the Ministry of Ecology, Energy and Sustainable Development and oversees a significant portion of the professional order of architects. Students of architecture, however, whether of Beaux-Arts or Polytechnic heritage, have systematically decried their exclusion from the universities, centers for liberal arts and science education. While the issue may have been publically on the table around the events of 68, at the request of the *comité de grève de l’école des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and officially petitioned in January of 1969 in Nantes where the students abandoned the local Beaux-Arts to occupy the uni-

versity’s Faculty of Letters, the government never granted architecture students their wish to, as Roland Castro phrased it, “become intellectuals”.³ As emblematic as it is of the intrinsic political nature of architecture and of the anxiety that its influence enables, it is also telling of a cultural incompatibility between scholarly education and professional formation that finds its origins in antiquity.

From the early days of the Greco-Roman empire until the middle ages, higher education schooled the aristocratic elite primarily in the subjects of the *Trivium*—rhetoric, grammar and dialectic, inculcating the future politicians and leaders with the ability to reason and debate, and only subsidiarily, of the *Quadrivium*—arithmetics, geometry, music and astronomy. Together, they formed the seven liberal arts. Socially, philosophical knowledge was considered superior to applied sciences: general culture aimed to liberate mankind while technical knowledge confined one to the practice of a limited craft. Until the Revolution, the only professional schools having access to higher academic education were those which directly served the political and social organization of the empire: law schools, which provided the society with experts in the art of argumentation, medical and theology schools.

From the Middle Ages until the Revolution, all professional formation occurred directly within the realm of professional guilds, which benefited from legal protection and complete control over the transmission of knowledge. Because of finite work opportunities, each professional ‘master’ would only be allowed to train one apprentice in addition to his biological descendents, enabling a semblance of opportunity for vertical social mobility. However, the highly competitive nature of these long and strenuous apprenticeships often limited candidates to those whose family could remunerate the ‘masters’. In contrast to the parallel mission of the University to grant everyone access to higher knowledge and to create an environment in which both students and faculty collectively benefited from the highest flow of knowledge transmission, the free market logic of professional apprenticeship often hindered ‘masters’ from divulging all of their “secrets” to apprentices who, on the long run, would become competitors to their direct progeny.⁴

This attitude is still significantly observed today, due to the ever-decreasing opportunities for com-

missions and the unrestricted licensing of professional architects. With the only scholars among the faculty members leaving architecture schools for teaching jobs at the university, architecture schools are overwhelmingly staffed with practicing architects who are offered little compensation other than a cultivated sense of social prestige that directly benefits their practice. Students can never fully suppress an identity as future competitors. The form and content of teaching diverges from a mutually enriching transmission of knowledge into a complex diagram of mutual exploitation.

During the 18th century however, the limitations of the apprenticeship system was denounced as holding back economic expansion. The state opened special academies for the disciplines that served its propagandist ends, namely cultural, engineering and military production. The creation of public cultural institutions or schools of civil engineering, from the Academy of Painting and Sculpture and the Academy of Architecture to the *École des Pont et Chaussées* or the regional drafting schools, greatly challenged the monopoly of the apprenticeship system, which, officially banned in 1791, was replaced by industry sponsored institutes of technology. Empowered by their financial contribution, industry leaders defined the content of these educational programs according to their production needs. But with the necessity to grant student-trainees a nationally accredited diploma came the civic responsibilities of liberal arts education. Generally overlooking their part of responsibility in the formation of voting citizens, these institutions were often denounced as extensions of the industrial establishment that rarely expressed concern with, as Ferdinand Buisson complained in 1887, “providing the working class with a decisive complement of intellectual and moral education.”⁵

For a few decades however, immediately following World War 2, professional education saw its golden years under the influence of a powerful alliance between the Communist Party, the Confederation of Labor and the union of metallurgical industries, collectively concerned with both a proper liberal education for the working class and the need for an educated workforce to reconstruct the nation.⁶ But the looming prospect of unemployment and the financial pressure of large industries have, over the past thirty years, forced professional and technical schools to progressively relinquish all autonomy,

and enabled the subservience to industry demands to which these schools are subjected today. The mandatory —and generally unpaid— yearly internships required to receive the governmentally accredited architecture diploma exemplifies the increasing necessity of an employable workforce over the production of a liberally educated middle class.

The resistance movement of 1968 was a joined movement between the working class, the very working class that had benefited from the enlightened education of the postwar years, and the student population. If, together, they vocalized a strong resistance against the depoliticization of education and the recuperation of the revolutionary ideas that had emerged from the Enlightenment, they were only enacting the very ideals of emancipation they had been taught, as they were witnessing the dismantling of a society that had taken a revolution to build 180 years prior. And if, in 1988, Guy Debord announced in his *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* the victory of neoliberalism over any possible resistance, he was only pointing to the edges of the spectacle closing in and disabling the option to stand outside of it. It had only taken the passing of a single generation for a population to lose its critical distance, since not only rhetoric but also grammar, philosophy, the arts of debate and the general culture that had helped emancipate the society had been removed from the programs of public education. “Spectacular domination’s first priority was to eradicate historical knowledge in general.”⁷ Can we imagine a civilization built by a population of architects able to critically engage in the very philosophical questions of society, rather than by one only versed in dutifully oiling and efficiently running its dubiously implanted mechanisms? We only can by dusting the history books.

3.0 THE SPIRIT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

No singular body of ideas has had more influence on the cultural identity of France today than those developed during the three quarters of century preceding the Revolution of 1789. The evocation of that era’s thought currents is thereby in the service of understanding the current crisis formed by the effect of contradictory ideologies that have influenced not only current French professional education, but equally most of the Western world’s. How does one reconcile the dual existential ends between the aspirations “to be”, as defined by the

Enlightenment thinkers of 18th century France, with that “to have”, developed a century later with the English tradition of classical liberalism? How does one balance a social model that privileges the public good with one that protects private wellbeing?

Between the private sphere at its core and the legal sphere defining its periphery exists a public or social realm, filled with norms and mores continuously amended through public debate. Between the limits imposed by state laws (avoiding crime) and those by one’s faith (avoiding sin) lays the public sphere of civil society, the subject of Enlightenment thought. Access to free education, the predominant public service, was established to enable citizens to think for themselves, liberating each individual from norms imposed by the others. An incessant questioning of the mechanisms through which reason is assessed and the pursuit of truth led Kant to define the 18th century as “the age of criticism, to which everything must be subjected.”⁸ Through the pursuit of autonomy and the necessity for secularization, public education aimed to serve the collective wellbeing and common interest of humanity, two means and an end that demand further elaboration.

3.1 On Autonomy

Contemporary principles of education such as Jacques Rancière’s notion of “intellectual emancipation” or bell hook’s definition of education as “the practice of freedom” find their origins delineated in one of the first essays entirely devoted to pedagogy, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s 1762 publication of *Emile: Or Treatise on Education*.⁹ In accordance with Rousseau, Jacques Rancière posits that instruction, like freedom, is not automatically acquired but must be actively appropriated. In “The Emancipated Spectator”, he further generalizes the emancipation of students to that of all “spectators” and denounces education as the transmission and reception of static data between one who knows and one who does not yet know—a “transmission predicated on a relation of inequality”. “Emancipation starts from the opposite principle, the principle of equality. It begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realize that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution, and that “interpreting the world” is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring

it. The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He connects what he observes with many other things he has observed on other stages, in other kinds of spaces.”¹⁰

Instruction enables an active and critical engagement with a subject of study, and the creative development of that activation constitutes one of the ends of instruction, not an infinite checklist of information. Or, as Michel Serres better phrases it, “the goal of instruction is the end of instruction, that is to say invention.”¹¹ These contemporary thinkers drew from the 18th century drive towards individual autonomy of thought and the emancipation from the reasoning logic of others, namely of those in power. The accumulation of knowledge may produce power, but critical reasoning enables humanity—to think enables being. “We may be men without being scholars,” Rousseau wrote in *Emile*.¹²

Reminiscent of the old Chinese proverb asserting that to teach a man to fish will feed him for a lifetime, Rousseau’s emphasis on teaching “reason” rather than “facts” rightfully dismissed content as a sustainable or even meaningful end.¹³ In fact, to only teach content is to indoctrinate, if not to enslave. According to the humanist side of Enlightenment thought, teaching, regardless of the subject, services the greater act of “being” in the world at a particular moment in time. To help foster in students the ability to observe and interpret, to analyze and synthesize for themselves, is to enable their self-actualization, to elicit their independence and to progressively insure their freedom. Placing responsibility on the students to “make sense” of the information made available to them, and to make sense of “how” that information is being made available, engages them in the observation of form, of content and of the meta-levels through which form is formed simultaneously. In short, it enables one to see through and distance oneself from the ideology through which content is presented, exercising one’s capacity to distinguish between what one is taught and how it is taught, and locating between the two each lesson learned.

It is difficult to deny that in our current classroom conditions, the desire “to have” knowledge—or “to appear to have” it in its post-modern version—greatly surpasses students’ satisfaction with simply “being”, defined here by an act of pure reflec-

tion. While a good number of our students voice their appreciation for the freedom and responsibility “to interpret and transform”, to be engaged, critical and present rather than feel implicated in a rehearsed act that calls for audience participation, most students each year would clearly rather be handed predigested information—consumable data, prepaid. Thus are we served with the values of our time. Predictably, these are students who generally perform well in courses that involve the retention of facts, but suffer in design studios or in the courses that demand personal reflection and what Rousseau calls “the gift of invention”.¹⁴

If and when, today, ‘critical thought’ is mentioned in our syllabi, it is often as an end in itself, a feature on a line-up, part of the latest collection on display, advertisement geared towards the most ambitious of our consumers of knowledge. Despite being later made unpopular by the dead-end pessimism of the Frankfurt school, critical thought in the 18th century was never considered a mere end in itself but only the first and analytical step towards transformation and eventual reconstruction. Nicolas de Condorcet, key philosopher of the French Enlightenment and author of the most comprehensive and revolutionary essay on public instruction, specifically outlined the various goals of public instruction and the benefits of a nation constituted by a population able to think autonomously and apt with critical capacity. “The goal of instruction,” he writes, “is not to make men admire a legislation fully completed, but to render them capable of evaluating and correcting it.”¹⁵

Autonomy, as defined in the key texts of the eighteenth century, aimed to enable a society through the sum of freethinking individuals. This is far from the pursuit of disciplinary autonomy found in twentieth century cultural practices, which privileges disciplinary preservation over individual emancipation. The spirit of the Enlightenment fostered the practice of critical thought through exposure to a plurality of differing ideologies in order for an informed public will to emerge. Awareness of and independence from the ideological apparatuses influencing public opinion was instrumental in the pursuit of individual freedom, which would amount to a just society. Public instruction aimed to cultivate a critical distance from the ideological forces at play. In order to do so, it had to exist in a space that avoided the presence of a single school of thought, or of partial media. As explicitly stated by

Condorcet, the space of public education had to be free of ideology.

3.2 On Secularization

Clearly the secularization of public instruction intended to keep the private sphere of religion from influencing a desirably pluralistic public sphere. But religions weren’t the sole target to be kept out of the public school grounds. Secular education also aimed to keep the legal sphere of state control out of the public sphere of civic society. By the time of the Revolution, Condorcet had already foreseen the threat posed by the cult of the state itself, and the risk of letting those in political power influence the content of public instruction. “Political religion,” as he called it, exposed education to a greater danger than private religions because the state could control the public realm. It should be noted that Condorcet argued for the designation “Public Instruction”, warning against the biases of the term “National Education”, which ironically is exactly what the French public school system is called today.

Unfortunately, Condorcet’s insistence on the secular nature of the public realm proved itself utterly utopic on the long term, specifically in the face of twenty-first century liberal democracies. While the intention to dedicate an ideologically neutralized zone to public instruction — a “territory subtracted from the control of state power, enabling the preservation of individuals’ critical capacities”— served to educate the generations of critical thinkers that culminated with the “French theory” intellectuals, the recurrence of educational reforms over the second half of the twentieth century progressively dissolved all remnants of emancipation educators had from state power, itself increasingly under the control of financial interests.¹⁶ This downfall did not go unnoticed by an all too well educated working class. The following excerpt, taken from the 1948 weekly chronicle of a schoolteacher in the Rémois paper *La Champagne*, clearly illustrates the already simmering spirit of revolt that would become increasingly ambient over the next two decades.

“The laic (public secular) school forged in [Annie] the clarity of her thoughts, an analytical mind able to dismiss superstitions, dogmas artificially established by one class in order to dominate another, hers, the working class. Annie understands why this education is now being undermined. This instrument, forged by a blooming capitalism to form a working class capable of adapting itself to machine operation, has become

*an instrument of emancipation for this very class. This is why the bourgeoisie today wants to destroy the public school that has become an obstacle to the exploitation of the workers it continues to form.*¹⁷

Once the ideals of education established in the wake of the Enlightenment proved to have served the interests of those in power, the autonomy of a freethinking, emancipated public would only inconvenience the ruling class, which actively took control of the means of education.

Over two hundred years have past since the publication of Condorcet's proposals for public instruction. All that was cautioned against has been incrementally instituted and, through the loss of public funding, "national education" has been forced to operate in privatized form, largely financed by corporate sponsorship. In higher education, where the risks of forming a freethinking ruling class are extra-carefully managed, the conflicts of interest endangering the remnants of "independent" research are quickly dismissed to the lure of funding. If the intellectual elite of the country, the product of today's public liberal arts education, has no qualms about receiving funds from not only national private businesses but also multinational corporations, foreign governments, or even the US military, it seems unreasonable to decry the opportunities afforded by a sponsored studio in a professional architecture school, based on ideological grounds. Yet, is it reasonable to completely lose the ends of education? The bottom-line why we teach what we teach, whose interests are being served along the way, and who it most services in the end? Is it unreasonable to foreground the role of "educator" in our positions as teachers of architecture, and with it, to consider the ethical function of education in teaching our youth at least as much as the ethical function of architecture in the formation of architects?

3.3 On Humanism

Here again I return to the spirit of the eighteenth century in which the origins of public instruction were delineated. Great existential questions were posed and the pursuit of happiness was established a universal right. The maintenance of humanity's wellbeing at the forefront of social goals may have been too overwhelming an objective. With each passing generation, it became increasingly instrumentalized with hypothetical means of achieving happiness turned into universalized ends in and of themselves—own-

ership being a prime example. Ownership does not intrinsically equate happiness, but the proof of its realistic achievement is certifiable, making it a more judicious pledge to make by, say, a campaigning government.

Nowhere has the distance between means and ends—and the loss of reasonable ends—grown to extremes as much as it has in the United States, where I wish to conclude this paper. The convenient interchangeability of happiness for ownership example mentioned above can be found in the Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution, in which the words "[No person shall] be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law" were directly borrowed and modified from the Declaration of Independence's naming of unalienable rights as "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". As trivial as this example may seem, it perfectly illustrates the American paradox—a nation founded on the merging of two irreconcilable sources of influences: the political philosophy of the French enlightenment, imported by the likes of Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin, and the political ideology of classical liberalism, influenced by British thought. These antecedents yielded a fragile balance between two ends that don't easily coexist: equality and freedom. Each can serve as means towards happiness, but a difference between collective and individual happiness already nuances their purposes. With each new means, the distance between means and ends increases, making space for ideological agendas. Pushed too far, the original ends disappear, disabling meaning along the way. How far are we, culturally, from the humanist pursuit of happiness? In the world of art for art's sake, one doesn't question money for money's sake or power for power's sake. Within the realm of the university, it would seem absurd to receive funding from the state on the grounds of a proposal for happiness, or peace. The real absurdity comes with the unquestioned funding of development for development's sake, or of growth for growth's sake.

It may be argued that it is not the place of an architecture school to question the development of technology for technology's sake. But is there, if not a better place, another place?

4.0 CONCLUSION

While architecture schools today are aiming towards a global standardization and the distinction

between the educations of architects in Europe and those in North America may not amount to much, I return to the initial differentiation that should, potentially, shed a light of hope on the future designers of our public spaces: most graduates of North American architecture programs were educated in public universities. While the administrative structure of the French schools of architecture would have to be fundamentally shaken for any change to take place, the increasing popularity of North American M.Arch programs for students holding a college degree in non-architectural fields bears hope that the value of a strong liberal arts education is not given in to the evermore pressing demands for specialized knowledge.

The emergence of new technologies will not cease. If architects lose the ability to question the ends of their tools to becoming expert operators, they themselves will serve as nothing but muted instruments of power, whose ends they might even ignore.

ENDNOTES

1 Jean Baudrillard, "The Spiraling Cadaver," in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994): 153.

2 Michel Denès, *Le Fantôme des Beaux-Arts: L'enseignement de l'architecture depuis 1968* (Paris: Les éditions de la Villette, 1999): 88.

3 Ibid., 225, 233; Roland Castro, "Le système beaux-arts avant 1968", *AMC* 45 (Mai 1978): 24-25.

4 Vincent Troger & Jean-Claude Ruano-Borbalan, *Histoire du système éducatif* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005): 77.

5 Gilles Moreau, "L'enseignement professionnel ou la défaite d'un projet émancipateur," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Avril 2004): 22-23.

6 Troger & Ruano-Borbalan, *Histoire du système éducatif*, 86.

7 Guy Debord, *Commentaire sur la société du spectacle*, tr. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1998):13

8 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Preface to the First Edition of 1781, trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn (London: Everyman, 1993): 4-5.

9 Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).

10 Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Art Forum* (March 2007): 277.

11 Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 92.

12 J. J. Rousseau, *Emile: Or Treatise on Education*, trans. William H. Payne (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003): 349.

13 Ibid., 110.

14 Ibid., 110.

15 Condorcet, *Cinq memoires sur l'instruction publique* (1791) (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1994): 93

16 Tzvetan Todorov, *L'Esprit des Lumières* (Paris: Laffont, 2006): 50.

17 Annie Raymonde Borgniet, "Sur l'instruction," *Chroniques d'Annie, La Champagne* (07.10.1948). Reprinted at: <http://annette.merle.borgniet.over-blog.com/article-chroniques-d-annie-raymonde-borgniet-juillet-1948-59325931.html>, accessed on November 10, 2010. Translated by author.