Ethical Positions in Built Environment Education

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Abstract: Architecture has among its goals, to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of society. It is therefore inevitable that ethical decisions are made in the process making architecture. The perceived value of the product, 'shelter' is often, taken for granted – until something goes wrong. It is only then that questions arise about quality of the product, the values of practitioners, and as a matter of course, to discussions about ethical positions forged as part of the education process. Contrary to common belief, ethical positions are not intrinsically inherent in society, but are learned as pat of the formal and/or informal education process. As part of the five or six year architecture programme, students are exposed to a multitude of ethical positions, from basic value judgements related to beauty and aesthetics - good and bad; to investigations of historical attempts to portray truth and purity; to the more pragmatic and contemporary issues dealing with context, sustainability and social equality. This paper looks at educational context within which architecture education is situated in Uganda, and how this may have an impact on the eventual ethical positions taken by professionals.

Keywords: Ethics; values; architecture education; Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

In Uganda, as in much of Africa, the role of built environment educators is seen as twofold: first, to educate individuals in a particular discipline; and second, to help students identify with the issues that they will be faced with in their chosen careers. Significant attention has been given to the pragmatics of the latter – the transmission of knowledge to enable development of a 'modern' society. This approach tended to ignore past experiences, and has often required the dislocation of students from their society as a prerequisite to becoming professionals (Odoch Pido 2002). This process was reinforced by an **enforced** separation of 'Arts' and 'Science' at Secondary and Tertiary levels of education, in a fallacious belief that the two are separate educational entities, one subjective and based on 'the local', while the other objective and internationally focused, therefore valued as being crucial for the development of a modern society. Consequently in the formal education sphere, the 'bright students' were directed into the 'sciences', while the 'not so bright' took 'arts' (Olweny & Nshemereirwe 2006). This persists to this day, perpetuating the view that to undertake a 'proper' science programme, one has to discard the social-cultural baggage of one's heritage – in effect discarding the very essence of humanity. Further, the logical positivist approach often seen in scientific inquiry was perceived to be objective, and therefore 'proper' science. In this light, the African paradigm has been taken as being backward, retrogressive, and unauthentic and as it had not been scientifically verified, and was therefore unreliable (Ngara 2007).

The educational setting itself has been the main avenue through which a foreign aesthetic (and ethic) were transmitted. In relation to architecture, the prejudices of an essentially European profession still exist in architecture education today and invariably in architecture practice as well. As such, debates arise relating to architecture, culture and identity, based on the interplay between the historical origins of the profession, and the local context. The lack of non-European architecture on Sir Bannister Fletcher's 'Tree of Architecture' illustrates this, with its prejudice against Africa evident in the following dialogue by Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, two early architectural educators who worked in West Africa during the 1950's and 1960's:

> *Maxwell Fry*: A Nigerian aesthetic? On what would it be based that is as solid as the plywood techniques, the old timber traditions of Finland? *Jane Drew*: If a Nigerian genius were to be born, upon what deeply-felt indigenous art might it not feed – and be better digested, perhaps, than Picasso's reactions? (quoted in Ihejirika, 2000:185)

It was therefore inevitable that the Eurocentric notions of beauty and aesthetics and embedded prejudices against the local aesthetic found their way into architecture education and subsequently into professional practice in Africa.

Therefore, as educators, how can we ensure that students gain an appreciation for the indigenous in light of an overwhelming bias towards 'the foreign'? What are our responsibilities as educators in this discourse? Does it stop at a single course on ethics, or does it go further and actively engage students in such discourse as part of their overall educational experience? (Olweny & Wadulo 2008). These are some of the questions raised as part of an ongoing investigation on the future of architecture education at the Uganda Martyrs University. Key to this dialogue is the purpose of architecture education and the values attached to it.

A QUESTION OF ETHICS?

According to Koutsoumpos (2006), ethical behaviour is not intrinsically inherent in society, but must be learned. A question therefore is: how can ethics be taught in the context of the duality that exists between indigenous thought and western education systems and practice, not to mention the complex multi-ethnic societies in which architecture is practiced? With education playing a key role in the formulation of ethical positions, surprisingly, there has been little discourse about the importance of education in shaping our ethical positions, and thereafter the built environments that shape us.

A key consideration is the fact that ethics, and ethical values, are not static, but are part of the evolutionary process of societal transformation, which Olweny (1994) describes as 'value-re-standardisation', defined as changes to societal values and positions. Over time, unfortunately, it is often perceived that such changes are often towards the negative. However, conflicts arise not from the changed situation, but rather from the application of unchanged, or static rules and values to a changed situation. In relation to the practice of architecture in Uganda, two documents that are the basis for the planning approval process are of interest: the Uganda Town and Country Planning Act 1951, and the Public Health Act 1964. Both documents have existed virtually unchanged since being gazetted, and are the basis for determining planning approval. While the rationale for their existence is unquestioned, the justification for their continued application in their current form raises significant ethical dilemmas for built environment professionals. Not only are the Acts prescriptive, at times calling for solutions that have long since been superseded by technology and advanced design solutions, their continued use and enforcement by overzealous planning officials stifles progress in architecture.

In regard to design, building accessibility is a clear example of the mismatch between legislative requirements, and the re-standardised values of the twenty-first century society. With the status of a building often defined by its inaccessibility – the number of steps leading up to the main entrance representing the degree of importance of a particular work of architecture – its power and status. Today, this approach to architecture is viewed as inappropriate, with the need to have buildings accessible to all a key requirement. While societal values have changed, legislation to ensure that this happens is still in the pipeline, with the accessibility guidelines only just being made available. Similarly, contemporary issues relating to sustainability are for the most part being driven less by legislation, but rather by proactive professionals. Would it therefore be ethical to ignore important contemporary issues as they are not required as part of the legal statutes of the country? In inquiry-based profession such as architecture, one cannot justify ignoring the greater good and allow deficient legislation to take precedence. As such, removal of the stipulated 150mm step required at the entrance to public buildings to allow for easy access for all, which would be viewed as breaking the law, is however ethically appropriate as it truly makes a building accessible.

With knowledge presented as the major component of education, and often transmitted unquestioned from teacher to student – it is evident that the educational process can in part be responsible for the ethical dilemmas faced by professionals. The changing values in society over time demand changes in the approach to professional issues, and consequently, the education and training of professionals should enable this to happen.

ROLES OF THE ARCHITECT

What is the role of the Architect in a developing country like Uganda? For this answer, we take a brief journey to the past. The Egyptian High Priest and architect Imhotep, widely regarded as the first architect known by name, could be seen as responding to the socio-eco-political demands of his employer, Horus Netjerikhet, better known as Djoser, when he designed the Step Pyramid complex of Djoser at Saqqara in Egypt. On the other

hand, the designers of the first huts were responding to more pragmatic concerns, primarily a demand for a waterproof and enemy proof shelter. These two key aspects of architecture are still the basis of contemporary architecture. However, while the basic functions of architecture have not changed, a greater appreciation of the context of architecture now demands a different approach to the education and practice of architecture. Today legal issues predominate, with fire egress, environmental responsibility, health and safety issues all presenting additional challenges to professionals. On the economic front, 'saving resources', and 'cost effective design' are buzz words that often translate to cost effectiveness in construction rather than cost effectiveness in operation. This approach distorts the actual cost of building and operating buildings and is a raging debate in architecture practice. These contemporary challenges pose significant ethical questions for the practicing architect.

It is estimated that in 2007, the world's urban population exceeded its rural population for the first time in history. This rapid urbanisation significantly changes the role and relationship between architects and society. While in antiquity the majority of humanity resided in rural environments and were responsible for the provision of their own shelter, urbanisation brings with it numerous complex and conflicting demands that require the skills of a widely educated professional to resolve. While contemporary architects are no longer undertaking the activities ascribed to the ancient 'Master Builders', they are now required to be highly skilled technologists, designers and educators, able to coordinate comprehend complex problems. The nostalgic role of the architect as a 'Master Builder' – a god like figure, as depicted by Howard Roark in the Ayn Rand novel 'The Fountainhead' – has a lot to do with the current state of practice. The uncompromising self-indulgent architect has made ethical consideration particularly pertinent for the profession.

ETHICS IN ARCHITECTURE EDUCATION

A number of key issues related to an architecture curriculum can directly impact on ethical positions in architecture practice. These include: i) the 'empty vessel approach' to teaching, in which students are treated as passive receptacles of information, coming to university to be 'filled' with (pre-determined) wisdom of their professors (Saidi 2005; Hill 2006; Pérez-Gómez 2007). The Odoch Pido experience, in which students must discard their past experiences in order to participate in education, is still a feature in university level education in Uganda. This approach inevitably leads to 'information overload' with instructors spoon-feeding students "all the required information – indisputable facts – that would make them 'experts' in their careers…" (Olweny & Nshemereirwe 2006; Olweny 2008). ii.) Un-coordinated programmes, crammed with numerous information sessions but little time available for exploration and reflection, inevitably resulting in 'drawing board architecture' (Perez-Gomez 2007:124). Clearly, architecture is not a classroom activity, but a social activity that should relate to the social and community aspects of the world. As such, the emphasis on classroom-based instruction, dominated by numerous hours of lectures, is a dilemma the architecture profession has to contend with: the isolation of students from 'real world' conditions in which they inevitably must interact.

According to Oliver (2005), few schools of architecture attempt to explicitly share an ethical map with their students. This has been aided by a stress on individuality and competition, above collaboration and team work. Consequently, according to Cortese (2003), common assumptions are rarely questioned, directly impacting on the ability to act ethically in the face of conflicts. Some of the unquestioned assumptions still prevalent include: "Humans are the dominant species and separate from the rest of nature; Resources are free [available] and inexhaustible; Earth's ecosystems can assimilate all human impacts; Technology will solve most of society's problems; All human needs and wants can be met through material means, and; Individual success is independent of the health and well-being of communities, cultures and the life support system" (Cortese 2003:17). In architectural education such assumptions often translate into self-indulgent practice, resulting in an architecture that is regarded as having no moral philosophy. The disconnection between education and the context within which it is undertaken, along with an inability to question or challenge long held assumptions, are clearly problematic.

EDUCATION, TRAINING AND INTEGRATION

The location of architecture at the intersection between the 'Arts' and 'Sciences' has, in part, contributed to some of the confusion in architectural education. This has been compounded by the fact that architecture is in part a vocation, as much as it is an academic art. Consequently, the approach to the education of architects tends to be a hybrid between 'education' in the true sense of the word, and 'training', in order to graduate well-rounded architects. With architects having to work in situations for which they have not been explicitly trained, and planning for conditions that do not exist yet, it is imperative that they be enabled to acknowledge the existence

of dilemmas that they will face.

The dominance of the training aspect of architecture, a consequence of a need to 'train' architects who can immediately, upon graduation, slot into their prescribed roles – as drafting technicians – has tended to direct architects away from the discourse which is an integral as part of the process of making architecture. While both the vocational and educational aspects are essential to architecture, too much of one over the other is potentially disastrous. Too much attention to the training component often overshadows the educational component of architecture, effectively stifling architecture's key aspect, its multidisciplinary nature. This is further reinforced by an opposing view that architecture is a 'fine art' and therefore should stay away from pragmatics. The result: a severely fragmented curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

Viewing architecture as a holistic profession, it is clear that architectural education also needs to be approached holistically. The relationship between art and science, vocation and education, is the essence of good architectural education. The changing role of the architect in society demands that the architect is able to constantly adjust roles and adapt to a continually changing world with increasingly complex ethical dilemmas. While training provides the basis for the practice of architecture, education provides the framework for the social context in which architecture exists.

However, architecture is as much an ethical discipline as it is a design discipline (Wasserman, Sullivan & Palermo 2000). As such, a lot more effort will have to be made to ensure that ethical values are embedded in the architecture curriculum. During the short time students spend at university, educators can only begin to expose students to the ethical position in architecture. Like any area of the curriculum, it is impossible to exhaustively address ethics. Nevertheless, students need to be exposed to ethics, rather than left in an ethical void. In relation to medical practitioners, Olweny asks, "how do you remain ethical when the rest of the world around you appears to be unethical?" (1994:172). Such a question could indeed be asked of architects as well. How can they maintain a certain level of ethical behaviour in light of constantly changing conditions? Is it only that we are applying a different set of ethical values in the wrong situation, or is it also that ethics itself has been left out of the architecture curriculum or selectively presented to students?

Clearly we cannot continue to maintain the status quo, as it has not served the ends that are desirable, but rather to perpetuate a myth that architects are separate from reality. In order to redress the situation it is essential that architecture education, and for that matter professional education, be geared towards new approaches to learning and practice that enable students and graduates to take leadership roles (Cortese 2003:17). Education is an enabling process, and by ensuring that it is presented as such will enable students to appreciate a broader range of ethical issues that they will and do face as part of the practice of architecture.

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