

TEACHING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

– SHOULD THERE BE COURSEWORK IN HISTORY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHITECTURAL CURRICULUM?

BY: **ROGER C FISHER, EMERITUS PROFESSOR IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE, UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**

A YOUNG COLLEAGUE, Johan Swart, newly appointed into the position I once taught at the University of Pretoria's Department of Architecture, posed these questions to me and I believe they and my responses are worth sharing.

This was Swart's question: 'In the study of architectural history, students get confronted with a myriad of styles, periods and paradigms that refer back to periods before them: Romanesque, Renaissance, Neo-Renaissance, Neo-Classicism, Historicism, Eclecticism, etc. To explain the differences between these periods is an exhaustive task and to recognise them in the built environment is impossible for the novice. How would you approach a discussion of these periods of architectural history if you were forced to discuss them comparatively and conceptually? With the focus on differentiation, how should learning in this regard begin? Or is a chronological study and academic sweat the only starting point?'

And this was my response: In true postmodern fashion, let me deconstruct your question. At the core of the debate is: Should the history of architecture be in the teaching curriculum for architecture? If so, why? If this is accepted, what then? And how?

I've argued in depth elsewhere why the discipline of architecture has history in the curriculum, but let me here just give a cursory position. As someone whose position is within an eco-systemic paradigm, I hold the attitude that architecture is a necessary and evolving cultural endeavour, being one of those cultural activities that make us as a species at home in the world. As individuals, we are linked to the past through what is termed the collective consciousness, which embodies its own collective memory. One of the formal techniques we have

devised is to unravel the warp and weft of culture into disciplinary strands, each writing its own narrative thread. To pursue the metaphor, not only does each discipline have its own narrative thread, but these threads have many strands, depending on the bias of the narrator. This does not mean to me that there are either only relative histories, as the relativists would have it, nor do I subscribe to uncontested factual histories as the positivists would have it. I do, however, believe that history is a cultural construct of human making. What I also believe is that axiomatically, the arrow of time is a fact and that the past is done and the future unknown and unknowable.

So then let us put architecture into the picture.

Architecture is a discipline with a long past within the context of culture (short in an evolutionary context!) – that is, it is traditive. Not only that, but it is additive and incremental. In the discipline we dispense with very little, and complement what we have known with what we learn or discover. Let me also add that it is a discipline with its own vocabulary and that vocabulary has two natures – the first is its inherent silent vocabulary of form-giving and space-making and the other a spoken vocabulary where these muted things are named, described, discussed and interrogated. A student coming to the discipline has to master both languages.

In teaching the neophyte architect, our point of departure is that we have an intellectually pristine initiate into the culture of architecture. That initiate needs to be encultured through teaching, which means having the cultural practices of the discipline inculcated through a rite of passage. As said earlier, two of these cultural practices are the languages of the discipline, one, silent and abstract, the

other a literal collection of terms which capture the facts, thoughts, ideas and activities of architecture. As with all discrete disciplinary practice, it is important for the student to master the vocabulary of that discipline and have a certain incisive precision in its use so as to keep a keen mind and precise medium for communication. This is even more important today in a litigious society which feeds the carnivores (to coin a phrase) of the legal profession preying off the corpses of failing professionals.

So I get to the question: How would you approach a discussion of these periods of architectural history if you were forced to discuss them comparatively and conceptually? With the focus on differentiation, how should learning in this regard begin? Or is a chronological study and academic sweat the only starting point? Unfortunately, again I must raise another issue before arguing directly. All of us who come to the teaching of architecture do so as novices and autodidacts. Few in the local context are taught to teach architecture – yet. In that sense, even academia accepts the traditive nature of the discipline and particularly when it comes to teaching. All teachers have been taught and have those who have taught us modes and models of pedagogy, either by being reactionary or respectful of the traditions of how we ourselves were taught.

Generally, the age group being taught is younger than 25 and at that age, because of hormonal differences, men and women are maturing at different rates. So the minds you are dealing with in a class of peers have inherent developmental differences, which affects the way information is dealt with and processed. I think it would do no harm to read some literature on developmental psychology of young adult learners in order to help

answer your question of how to impart knowledge appropriate to their age.

Another point to consider is the body of knowledge. We live in the information era; information is readily to hand proffering a myriad of facts and opinions. But how to deal with them? How much should be committed to memory and how much consigned to the mental litter basket? In the past, knowledge was passed on as canonic and almost immutable. In the way I was taught, only Building Science, as it was then termed, and Theory of Structures – taught in the form of understanding the nature of materials and natural phenomena and how these were interpreted into algorithms, so that one could rationally employ facts – were not entirely in the realm of canonic knowledge.

I believe that this holds the seeds of how we should be teaching all subjects. We need to identify iconic examples that are rich, powerful and memorable that act as specific exemplars for general engagement. I need to elaborate on this thought. I hold that the student should encounter these same examples many times in the curriculum in order to garner different understandings from different perspectives to different ends, engaging different disciplinary attitudes to the same examples, hence knowing the same thing in many ways – addressing the so-called ‘multiple intelligence’ of the individual candidates. What this requires is a managed curriculum across the spectrum of subjects taught. The history classroom is the ideal place to introduce a critical understanding of such examples. But they should be encountered many times to enrich understanding – in the Theory of Structures, Construction, and Building Climate and Ecology. By knowing few but significant things well, you can know many things richly.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

We live in a country of rich cultural diversity. When I was taught we were all metaphorical Greeks. We were even given the line in one of my early History of the Environment lectures: ‘We are all Greeks.’ Today that is not a useful, or even politically correct, springboard for teaching.

But if we are not all Greeks, then what are we? We need to find a basis of intellectual commonality on which

to found a body of knowledge. I hold that the discipline of architecture is part of the shared cultural activities of us as human beings and universal in its language. Where it diverges is culturally in the particulars and peculiarities of its expression. While we are teaching ‘novices’ of different cultural backgrounds, it is our desire that when they graduate into the profession they are comfortably and recognisably part of a worldwide body of architects. We need to teach for convergence, while being intellectually respectful and mindful of difference and diversity.

So when you state that architectural history students get confronted with a myriad of styles, periods and paradigms, I ask myself: Should this be an approach at all? Is it still appropriate in the contemporary curriculum? And then specifically in the schools of architecture in South Africa?

Which brings me to the crux of the question and here is my answer: I believe the contemporary curriculum should be founded on the following ideas. We should respect the diversity of the cultures of our people and hence the people we teach. We need to draw on this diversity to discover commonalities. Commonality should be embellished with examples of the specific individual in order to allow them to play to their strengths, thereby setting them up for personal growth and success, and not frustration and failure. In other words, the curriculum should play to the embodied intelligence of the candidate.

I believe teaching should be done through interaction and sharing. A creative teacher sets probing questions whereby each student is challenged to discover, critically engage, elicit and share the specifics of their own world of knowledge in order to build commonality – both universal and specific to the discipline. An engaged teacher will facilitate and direct this learning so as to help the students develop.

We have done such exercises in the curriculum before, but they remain useful for discovering an aspect of the discipline we call history. For example, does your culture have an origin legend?

What is it? What does your name mean? What is its origin? Where were you born? Have you a memorable building, structure or landscape from

your past? What is it called? What is its function?

Can you represent it? Can you name the parts you represent in your own language? In another language?

This exercise should not take more than a quarter and could be dovetailed in the Design Studio and Building Technology classes to develop an understanding of how the different aspects of the discipline deal with the representation and naming of parts.

The next quarter could be the development of a broader picture of understanding of long history, using the Creative Legends as springboard, while drawing on that which is represented by the scientific narrative and where the department is well placed to organise field trips. I’d even take students by bus to Barberton to the Genesis Trail, which is lined with interpretative boards. One should be able to dovetail this with what they are engaging in the Earth Sciences course.

Then you next have the campus – you can do an entire History of Architecture course just with the buildings there – everything from Greek Revival to Post-Modernism and Neo-Modernism. This is where you change and start linking the discoverable to a wider world, both chronologically and internationally.

Thereafter one uses the local example to engage other African architectural expressions. Then we can present ‘exotic’ cultures, such as the Mayans, Incas and Aztecs of Central and South America.

Finally, in third year they should be taught to understand all they have learnt as giving guidance to context. We could call this Applied History.

I believe that all the formal content should be done by the middle of third year so that the candidate can apply and demonstrate this knowledge in holistic fashion in the final design scheme, perhaps with some formal submission of an essay and any related research documentation. This should be formally examined.

These are my first-stab thoughts, not well structured or detailed as yet. Underlying my specific thoughts are implicit a need for a broad-based, integrated curriculum renewal and development based on the ‘self’ of the individual candidate and their embodied intelligence.

P.S. I have not addressed aspects of heritage and field trips, but will treat these as a separate issue.