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ARGUMENT AND CRIME

Designing theory or theorizing design.

More than ever, there's the subconscious idea, among the architects and aspiring architects' community, that the practice of architectural design is a separate entity from its theorization, with the depreciation of the latter. The reasons behind the implementation of this idea are several and derive from different origins. The most common one is the very aspiration of the architecture student who "wants to fit into a studio, not analyzing other possibilities" (Cruz, p. 56).

In this field, there are multiple statements I may quote, from my experience as an architecture student (1995-2001), in which a given theory teacher was despised "for only having designed a gate in his life" or an architectural design one was despised for "being a theoretician".

More than being a merely empirical (but critical) verification of a generalized idea, certain thinkers reinforce it, mentioning that the researcher architect is regarded derogatorily as if he didn't have the skill to design, while the ideal architectural design teacher is the one who has professional success as an architect (Gänshirt, 2007, p. 7)[1].

Ethics and cosmetics

The dialectic felt within the academic field, or even among those who aspire belonging to it, is not limited to that sphere, being legitimate to argue that it's strongly nourished by external sources which privilege design and, more specifically, its image or look, at the expense of the theoretical content that justifies and integrates the work into a certain space and time. The entry of architecture into a social context where objects are valued by their prestige, beyond their intrinsic qualities, has certainly led to the glorification of their image by the observer, whether he/she is an expert on the subject or an occasional bystander.

To legitimize a project through its image is, indirectly, to diminish the theoretical content on which the proposal was based and, therefore, to deepen the abovementioned gap between theory and practice. The media and the way these are conceived are the main responsible, but these aren't limited to "gossip magazines", since within specialist publications we witness an increasing adoption of these principles.

Without the need of referring titles, all of us have already felt, in our usual architectural searches, that an increasing importance is being given to architecture photography at the expense of other ways of reading it: plans, sections, elevations, which are reduced, in their scale, to the incomprehension level. These photographs, glamorous because they're stripped of day-to-day life and decorated with iconic furniture (is it always the same?), work as a way to communicate the work to a broader audience but fail miserably in terms of architectural communication[2].

Thus, we enter the field of "Fresh Conservatism" (van Toorn, 1997), in which, under a layer of hypermodernity, hides a weak or nonexistent spatial research or respect for long-established dogmas. "Fresh" because it makes use of the current lack of direction in architecture (according to van Toorn) to impose an innovative, shocking and attractive image (to the media), which is highly personalized (for that very reason…), while it integrates itself into "mainstream" culture through the submission to long-standing and accepted (interior, exterior) spatial values. In other words, it's architecture wearing "the emperor's new clothes" (van Toorn, 1997, p. 9).

Another inherent risk of this posture had already been pointed out by Reyner Banham (1996, p. 293) when he signaled the danger of, on the contrary, the research of image by image leading architecture to a self-referenced world (understandable only by its own practisers), something which, anthropologically speaking, would lead to the extinction of its "tribe" (and of the subject).

Sterility and assisted reproduction

Yet, it's easy to blame the media, assuming ourselves as innocent bystanders of an irreversible process. Architects are the ones who produce architecture and they're the ones who dictate its canons. It may, however, happen (and, perhaps, it has happened) that "our creation" has gotten out of our control.

Recent architecture has been witnessing a depurative process which has led to its own sterilization. Minimalism easily comes to our minds – a source of pure monochromatic volumes, formally (though not theoretically) easy to replicate – but the fact is that the aforementioned sterility doesn't (just) refer itself to simplification: it refers itself to the decontextualization of the object from its surroundings that was carried out through an abolition of the signs by which we identified the shape with the place[3] and, thus, by which we "read" its paternity.

Here I refer myself to what I'll call the "defining elements of art" that, mainly throughout the 20th century, have progressively disappeared from the expressions of our ingenuity. I refer myself to the Sign, the Signified and the Signifier, which have been gradually abandoned (Jorge, 2012, p. 197) in favor of a more abstract and exclusive way to communicate the work. The Sign (Llorens, 1973, p. 405) was the first to disappear, as the shapes became abstract, unfamiliar to our immediate recognition but, nevertheless, fulfilled their purpose. The Signified (Name) remained, for the human figure was still there in Picasso's paintings and Adolf Loos depurated the decorative elements of what was still a house (Loos, 1908).

We're finally confronted with the mere persistence of the Signifier (or Concept), who/that which hides in a blank canvas and, sometimes, obscures the real purpose of the architectural work, eager to express itself and make itself seen.

We may, therefore, argue that the last stronghold which legitimizes art (architecture included) is ethics (Jorge, 2009, p. 14), seeing that it's the word, spoken or written, that backs up, justifies and makes us realize what the eyes don't see or understand[4].

The chicken and the egg and the chicken and the egg and the chicken

The subjection to the power of image in the sphere of architecture teaching is not new and it may be assimilated with processes in which there's a radical cut between preceding and ulterior ways: Walter Gropius, through the Bauhaus, intended to create a new mentality and a new creative process, but much of its impact on students and professionals was due to the new style and its clichés (Neto, p. 32)[5].

The architecture student, throughout his/her path, is necessarily naïve and impressionable, as it's during his/her university education that his/her first contact with practical and theoretical architecture takes place[6]. The separation between these two contexts is, therefore, impossible, as it would give rise to two different "architectures"; so, teaching both in parallel is mandatory. The context into which this statement fits makes perfect sense for the architecture teacher/student, because the circumstances in which they move themselves are, sometimes, the ones they accept as being "normal". Yet, studies by researchers outside architecture identify particularities in its teaching and consider its institutions as being outside the academic prototype (Medway, 2002, p. 126): the studio or architectural design classes are a specialty of architecture and the main subject for one to learn how to design (Mouat, 2010, p. 298). Another particularity of architecture, identified by many, is the fact that it's made by an alienated population, either due to excessive work[7], or by the efforts of the students themselves to stand out through their clothing, as if belonging to their own tribe (Till, 2009, p. 7).

Medway, a researcher in the linguistic field, bases his assessment on a research carried out in a Canadian school (about architecture students' notebooks), which he finds similar to other schools, in North America, and even presents noticeable similarities with teaching in Portugal[8]. Therefore, this "community in particular" (Mouat, 2010, p. 297) mentions, based on the aforementioned study, that the teaching of architecture is grounded on two opposing pedagogical practices: on one hand, the students produce a highly individualized work, through a very close relationship with the teachers; on the other hand, their assessment is also made by external evaluators (for instance, the subject's director), to whom the spoken discourse has a great weight.

It's within this context that we reintroduce the theme of the correlation between research and practice in the teaching of architectural design, as the practice of the latter presupposes a discourse that allows to critically frame its work (although there's the pedagogical posture in which it's expected for the project to "speak for itself").

We also reintroduce the issue of the architectural design teachers' quality being based only on their professional studio experience. Such belief would immediately lead to the conclusion that the work's critical support is unnecessary. Admittedly, their value derives not only from their practice but also from their ability to reflect upon their own work and to transform their implicit knowledge into "communicable, verifiable and arguable" knowledge (Gänshirt, 2007, p. 12); yet, according to the same author (p.16), research and design are related, as both produce

knowledge but from different kinds, being that design cannot be replaced by research (and vice-versa).

Still, isn't design also research? It can lead to acts of innovation that may be considered as worthy research, but those will be more valuable as research aides (Neveu, 2007, p. 9). In this context, we may argue that the research needed for the student to critically back up his/her work may be obtained by means of the theoretical classes that take place in parallel with architectural design classes[9]. In this sense we relieve the architectural design teacher from the need of additional knowledge. But we cannot forget that theoretical knowledge acquired in this way is generic and never referenced to the local, historic, topographic or social constraints of the design problem which is presented to the student.

Therefore, it's vital for the architectural design teacher to have an ideological core, obtained through research, to guide the student's practical research in order to provide an answer for the practical and social questions being raised to him/her. And, consequently, to verbally defend the shape he/she is proposing.

The navel

Thus, we conclude that the culture which is obtained through design practice alone is not enough for an architect's practical education. And, according to the abovementioned ethics and cosmetics issues - in the sense that the formal and theoretical context of a given work is a process which is built during the project's design - not to foster this procedure is to nourish the image of architecture as its only purpose, depriving it of its other values, given that the ideological core is absent and added to it as a formal residue meant to impress the impressionable ones.

An architectural design teacher deprived of cultures "others" than his/her "own", will make a biased use of the limited knowledge and tools with which he/she works in his/her design activity. In this manner, he/she will induce the student to a sort of practice that resembles his/her own, while other roads do exist. The type of relationship being established, in order to work, will have to be the master/apprentice one, in which there's a blind trust of the latter in the former's teachings: a model that easily works out as a kind of "brainwash" (Neto, p. 38).

To multiply this process is to reach the traditional teaching model, where design themes return one after the other over the years and, with them, the teachers. Assuming the architectural design teacher(s) as being autonomous from research, continuous brainwashes will manifest themselves[10]. If, on the other hand, the student adopts a skeptical (although healthy) posture in view of what's conveyed to him/her, he/she will finish his/her education with a diminished learning (by lack of additional sources).

This leads us to conclude that if a teaching institution - whether it's grounded on a classical, modern or post-modern language - imposes a specific way of designing, it remains as tyrannical as the old academic Beaux-Arts education. And this leads us to question the fallacious idea that if the architecture's image is something completely different, then the process that gave rise to it is also different (Till, 2009, p. 11). It's within this context that what makes architecture stand out is not "what is done", but "how it's done" (Banham, 1996, p. 294).

Von Humboldt & Socrates

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) determined the principles of a new education system, in opposition to the Master/Apprentice relationship that prevailed until then within the Academies (Nicolaides, 2012, p. 914). Talking about a "Humboldtian" university is making a reference to the connection between teaching and research, where teachers and students meet to promote science and culture. However, the freedom he gave to the academic staff gave each individual the ability to choose the subject he taught, as well as the methodology he used to teach it. Based on this assumption, the student would also have the freedom to choose his/her tutor.

At this point, von Humboldt is able to drift apart from the Academism in the sense that an Institution, as a unified whole, no longer defines specific guidelines for its type of education and for the results it provides. However, total freedom in the choice of subject and methodology implies a lack of control within the institution, meaning a lack of coordination between subjects, in the architecture field or in other issues. If the coordination between subjects is a clear necessity (so that there are no overlaps or absences of curricula and subjects), the need of a unique methodology to be used by all teachers is not so clear.

Still, a learning model close to the ideal would be the one in which there's a dialogue between teacher and student, in which questions and justifications come one after the other. Questions are raised; answers are obtained and then refuted, within a process that is commonly known as the "Socratic Method". In this method, the approach to the problem (project) is reflexive, since the basis for the discussion is refutation, grounded on what was stated by the interlocutor and not on preconceived definitions; finally, the "obtained knowledge is practical" (Neveu, 2007, p. 1).

This type of practice, which is also reflexive, is constantly referred and praised within the teaching context but, when applied to the teaching of architecture, namely of architectural design, it presents additional advantages that not only omit the pedagogical deficiencies felt in traditional education, but also try to get round architecture's own "*status quo*" as a practice.

As an art, architecture cannot aim at a type of scientific research whose results are unequivocal: Socrates refutes the interlocutor's initial statement, seeking to prove it wrong only according to certain premises. The way in which the discussion takes place is horizontal, with teacher and student placed in an equality plane: the hierarchy has to do with the fact that the student is the one who makes the first statement in order to be refuted.

The dialogue that takes place regarding the architectural proposal on top of the table is demanding at the theoretical and research levels for both parties, as it requires the knowledge of different architectural postures, past or present, in order for the conversation to be fluid. In this way, the idea that the architectural design teacher is disconnected from research is annulled, for this is another side of architecture. The only refutation of this fact has to do with the posture of a teacher who, as a master, may have the desire to influence or persuade, which, in practice, is the definition of that individual's lack of success as a university teacher (Adorno, 1970, quoted by Gänshirt, 2007, p. 12).

From the student's side, his/her argumentative skills are also explored, when he/she defends him or herself, refutes and even questions his/her teacher (placed in the same plane). At this level, the students are required to have a researcher's talents, at risk of becoming bystanders or puppets in the hands of the one who wants to influence or persuade them. The presentation of his/her knowledge is spoken, at least at this learning stage, but it prepares a context in which the presentation of his/her defense may be written. According to Mouat (2010, p. 4), the student doesn't have enough time to develop his/her writing skills, seeing that the short texts that go with the graphic representations are only meant to guide the student's speech and show the project's essential features. This, however, might be a relative problem, given the weight of the student's proposal's external assessment, backed up by his/her teacher, and also because, given the abovementioned arguments, the speech that results from the project's development process validates the discourse.

Finally, and concerning the "*star system*" in which we live, the student learns, since the beginning of his/her learning process, how to build a fluid, coherent and true discourse that backs up his/her formal proposal within the specific contexts and issues it is associated with. The Socratic dialogue's intention is also that of leading the interlocutor to develop his/her own moral rationality, resulting in the prevalence of ethics over image appreciation (cosmetics).

Conclusion

Architecture, when mistaken for a mere design practice, misleads both the aspirant and the experienced architect. Those who know how to do it, do it, let the work speak for itself and teach how to do it. Those who don't know how to do it, teach how to speak. Given that we live in a historical and social moment when we don't know how to speak or read, when we only let ourselves be thrilled by what we see, a theoretical void emerges (and also a formal one, which we'll only notice in the future) that needs to be urgently bridged beginning with education. Placing design on the same level of research is also assuming the opposite, so a correlation must exist between both of them. Promoting rotation within the teaching system may also be an idea, but it presents the risk of fostering superficial research processes, given the resulting thematic variety.

Teaching architectural design according to the process described above is also an act of ethics and humility, so it might become the perfect ground for a most truthful architecture.

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[1] Even a study carried out in 2003, in the United Kingdom (mentioned by Roberts, 2007, p. 4), points to the fact that the practices of theory and architectural design are independent and that there should be different institutions to teach those different fields of the same knowledge. For the prospective student this is a clearly unfair situation, as his/her previous unawareness of each subject's constituents prevents him/her from making a conscious choice regarding his/her education.

[2] By way of a joke, among friends, someone mentioned that the contemporary architect's best friend is the photographer as, besides knowing how to "hide" the building's "faults", he even brings his own furniture to decorate the house during the photographic session. Logically, it would later be collected to be used in a new photographic session for another building.

[3] And, by the way, with its dwellers, by means of their own furniture and personal belongings…

[4] About this topic it would be interesting to read Will Self's article in which he strongly criticizes top architects who, according to him, ignore ethics in favor of their careers: http://www.bdonline.co.uk/navigation/news/top-architects-lack-principles-says-will-self/5039573.article# [08.2012]

[5] Montaner (2001, p. 13) mentions that the International Style existed only due to an invention that was emphasized by MoMA's 1932 exhibition: a careful choice of the displayed buildings in order to correspond to the canons advocated by the Modern Movement, the presentation of pictures only in black and white, the omission of examples from the Futurism or the Amsterdam School, all of it to create a fake homogeneity in European architecture.

[6] Neveu (2007, p. 8), on the contrary, thinks that architecture students enter the faculty with a real knowledge about a building's design, as they all live in buildings. In this context, we wonder if the future student has a true perception of what architecture is.

[7] Jeremy Till, regarding this issue, ironizes about an e-mail that circulated in the faculty where he taught whose title was "You know you are an architecture student when…", followed, in the text body, by: "the alarm clock tells you when you should go to sleep"; "you know the taste of UHU"; "you are no longer seen in public"; "you refer yourself to great architects by their first name (Frank, Corb, Mies) as if you knew them". Forwarding this e-mail to his students, he said he felt sorrier for those who merrily saw themselves in the text, than for the ones who regretted identifying themselves with "the tribe".

[8] "(…) [the studio] is as open-plan area, interrupted only by bare concrete columns; within it students construct individual den-like work stations (…). In the studio course (assigned three half-days a week but occupying many more hours of the student's unscheduled time), the teachers typically set design projects that are worked on individually by the students for a period of weeks. On occasions they call the group together for advice and instruction and for a communal inspection of work in progress; mostly they circulate, spending time with each student and discussing his or her project, often at considerable length."

[9] "The principal vehicles for the integration of research and teaching within the architectural curriculum are likely to be through design studio teaching, or through more traditional pedagogical methods such as lectures and seminars." (Roberts, 2007, p. 9)

[10] In the study carried out by Andrew Roberts (2007, p. 18), the author states that at Newcastle University the students had the perception that the purpose of the classes was to learn about the teacher's research. The Welsh School of Architecture was the only one that offered their students the freedom to choose the subject of their research and even the research methodologies they adopted were not necessarily related to the ones used by the school's researchers.