EDUCATING THE ARCHITECT. A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO RENOVATE THE ARCHITECTURAL PROJECT DESIGN TEACHING

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Abstract

The University across 20th century has been suffering some changes that led to the formation of technical specialists in a more or less narrow segment of the human knowledge. The necessities of a very specialised and pragmatic society, that promotes the maximum efficacy among the professionals, is weakening the general knowledge of its members and, consequently, cutting off all the cultural aspects that do not produce benefits in a short term. This tendency is particularly strong within Architecture teaching.

This specialization is in opposition to the actually increasingly free and accessible information, where the added value is found in providing students with the capacity for analysis and creative thinking. The mere transmission of data or specific information quickly loses value confronted with the establishment of criteria that allow selecting among all available the most appropriate of those data. How can we focus at the same time on the most specific tasks and give the student the broader perspective of knowledge analysis?

The essay recovers the thoughts on Education of two philosophers, Bertrand Russell and Hans-Georg Gadamer, to apply them to the specific field of Architecture for promoting the formation of professionals with a global vision of knowledge prepared to give a full response to our changing society.

Keywords: Architectural design, general formation, specialization, self-education, Bertrand Russell, Hans-Georg Gadamer.

1 GENERALIZATION VERSUS SPECIALIZATION

As architects and teachers at the university, we often come up with the strength and quantity of our knowledge, skills, and ability to convey them. We are also constantly concerned about the circumstances that define the character formation of our students.

The university throughout the 20th century has undergone a series of changes that have led it to train technicians, specialists in more or less narrow fragments of human knowledge. The needs of a specialized and overly pragmatic society, which seeks the maximum effectiveness of its members, are excessively weakening the general formation of the individual, and limiting the development of culture that does not produce short-term benefits. It should be the work of the university to avoid that these events reach such a point that we lose the positive values of a humanistic heritage that allows forming people with a global vision of knowledge and an important capacity to adapt to the changes in this society that evolve so quickly, rather than individuals formed as effective gears of a global dehumanized machine that undoes them when they lose their force. D. Álvaro Siza used to say that the architect is the specialist of non-specialties, emphasizing the importance that in a discipline as broad as the architectural one we must have a sufficiently extensive and flexible formation to allow us to face the several problems of the profession.

The architect has the task of making decisions about the physical places in which society develops. These decisions have a greater or lesser public importance, but always imply a responsibility and direct consequences in the social aspects that, sometimes, are being neglected in the training of the current architects. All this leads us to the need to establish criteria and general lines of action that help in the work of transmitting to the student a solid base that transcends technical training and that allows him or her to face with security the challenge of proposing new options to the current society. The architect is not a stylist but an agent of social change.

Before analyzing the educational procedures of a future architect, it is necessary to specify the results that we wish to obtain. The professional possibilities of the future architect are much wider today than just 25 years ago. In fact, the traditional model of professionals who intends to develop their work
autonomously in their own office clearly entered into recession. The current architect is under the obligation and the need to collaborate with other colleagues, in addition to numerous professionals of other specialties. In addition, for some time now there have been developed aspects of professional work that do not focus on architectural design. Architects specializing in structures, construction management, municipal management, construction techniques, adaptability to the environment and the use of energy resources, architects programmers, landscapers, project managers or those who support the industry are just a few examples of the numerous open perspectives in the professional field. All these possibilities must be reflected in the training of the architect. Before defining what education seems preferable, we must have a clear idea of what types of architects we want.

We are at a crucial moment in terms of the definition of our profession. A crossroads forced equally by the convergence between the countries that make up this still ambiguous entity called Europe and the labour needs to redefine the spectrum of a profession that welcomes a growing number of professionals in a market saturated and which tends to differ from conventional models. At this point we are failing as a collective, there is an important resistance to modify the model of architect we are prepared to form, resistance based on the general and individual yearning for the benefits of the educational systems of the past. Although the duration is modified, although some content is adjusted and updated, although the systems derived from Bologna are supposed to be applied, reality finds us with a general outline of architecture studies anchored in the past and usually more a result of internal balances of the schools of Architecture than of the real training needs.

Should we continue to form architects-orchestra directors, or should we give society lots of small-scale specialists with no integrating ability or overall vision? Should we give up the humanistic and integral training of the architect? Is it lawful to refuse to see in a recalcitrant way what the real needs of an increasingly specialized and global labour market are? Can we afford the luxury of transforming the university into a set of pseudo-professional secondary institutes, attended by students with a decreasingly autonomous capacity to act? In short, how can we combine the specialization that the labour market seems to demand at the moment with the capacity for analysis and adaptation that seems to be the key to an ever closer future? How do we promote training specialists of anything and everything at all?

There are no obvious answers. But we would like to use some general reflections on the education of two philosophers, Bertrand Russell and Hans-Georg Gadamer, to apply them to the problematic of learning architecture.

2 RUSSELL’S IDEAS ON EDUCATION APPLIED TO ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

We begin this approach to the problem described using as reference one of the essays on education of Bertrand Russell that, despite the time elapsed, has not lost its validity in its fundamental purposes. Bertrand Russell defines in his essay On Education [1] those that he considers the four characteristics that, together, form the basis of the ideal character: "vitality, courage, sensitiveness and intelligence". Although Russell refers in his writing to education at an early age, we believe that these characteristics remain fundamental in the formation of the adult (and professional) character of the university students. Particularly we can apply them to the formation of architects to this day.

Russell continues in his writing: "Vitality promotes interest in the outside world; it also promotes the power of hard work". We must demand and encourage in students the architectural vitality. Encourage interest and curiosity, the desire to advance and improve on the processes of (self) educating architecture. It is necessary to eradicate apathy, lack of dedication and loss of appreciation of effort. After all, vitality means initiative, desire to discover and to increase the frontiers of our own knowledge. This is closely linked to the words of Russell, who argues that "Courage has several forms, and all of them are complex. Absence of fear is one thing, and the power of controlling fear is another". Perhaps the first fear to confine is the one of professors to judge things according to canons other than those learned. In this way we can promote the courage to choose a path, and not judge it, promoting self-esteem in our students, regardless their interests may differ with ours; without classifying them or demerit them by our affinities; understanding that we form someone who will pursue the same future goal as we, the development of architecture for the benefit of society. This requires preparing the students beyond the theoretical or practical tools of the profession. They need us to give them behavioural patterns to act as the social agents they are going to be and, of course, a realistic formation to allow them to feel confident enough to carry out their professional activity.
Russell goes on to explain that sensitiveness is a corrective for mere courage: “The cognitive aspect, however, comes under the head of intelligence; sensitiveness, in the sense in which I am using the term, belongs to the emotions. (…) The quality I have in mind is that of being affected pleasurably or the reverse by many things, and by the right things”. The sensitiveness in an architect is the key to being able to combine all the variables with which we work. That sensitiveness is coupled with the emotion that things produce on us, and emotion necessarily connects with a process of recognition of values that undoubtedly are learned and that consequently can be taught. The key is precisely how we find the proper direction to these stimuli and, even more, what are the stimuli and objectives that we must set in the process of education of students. This brings us to the perspective of a discipline in which the solutions to a given problem are multiple, and sometimes the greater goodness of a solution with respect to another can be articulated equally within the scope of subjectiveness.

Equally, we must contemplate the beauty of the processes. It is possible that the solution to a problem is not unique, but the process to reach a certain solution may be more beautiful than another, and that is something that we can evaluate objectively. The catalogue of built solutions also has a cultural component that is recognizable not only by us as specialists, but by the whole society. It is important to educate the future architect in the sensitivity of seeing and knowing how to transmit architecture with the specificity it contains. This relationship between knowing how to look at architecture and knowing how to transmit it is basic in the type of training we are undertaking.

The simulation character of architectural training, in which the students can hardly prove the accuracy of their proposals, makes the discourse of goodness more important in communicating the results. It is often easy to criticize the distance between what is truly transmitted in architecture and the packaging in which it is presented and it is true that this can lead to trends and even to the fixing of certain parameters that are perpetuated in complete cycles of professionals. In this sense, we ought to ask ourselves as teachers to check out these value propositions in our own professional activity.

In the last place, Russell mentions intelligence, and he continues: "When I speak of intelligence, I include both actual knowledge and receptivity to knowledge. The two are, in fact, closely connected. (…)No doubt the word 'intelligence' properly signifies rather an aptitude for acquiring knowledge than knowledge already acquired; but I do not think this aptitude is acquired except by exercise".

These words recall those other words of Livio Vacchini from his last lectures [2] in which he said that designing a project is "giving oneself to the pleasant activity of thinking, thinking in the sense of learning never of knowing". This directly connects with the idea of the difference between the mere transmission of information, the generation and acquisition of knowledge, and the ability to promote wisdom in our students. To foster this disposition and receptivity to the acquisition of knowledge as the first step to wisdom is the only way to keep our students up to date, always in condition to adapt themselves to the changing needs of the profession.

3 GADAMER AND THE ARCHITECTONIC HERMENEUTICS

Hans-Georg Gadamer points out in the transcription of his last lecture [3] that learning is only fully realized in the conversation. This idea is intrinsically linked to the methodology of the project design workshops where the conversation between students and teacher is precisely the one that directs the content of the topics to be discussed. The transfer of information takes the form of a dialogue, which includes, in a general or detailed way, any aspect of the project.

Gadamer reminds us the condition of our universities where "we have very large lectures in which there are hundreds of students. The professor cannot recognise the talented ones, nor can the students recognise among each other those who are of like mind". Gadamer continues: “This kind of self-education is particularly necessary for universities today, because today the mass media tend to dominate everything and because now indeed even more specialisation is promoted in the curricula and professional training courses at universities – despite the name ‘universities’”. This connects directly with the false perception of architecture students of easiness finding the necessary information for creating architecture. The Internet offers the possibility of finding endless references to a given architectural problem, most without depth or without proven validity. It also provides accurate and developed information, but usually covered by layers of insubstantial information that appears at first glance.

The instruction of architecture requires dialogue, close contact and reverberation of the student's work in an area with varied interlocutors. Gadamer speaks about «general training», and thus refers to something that, in fact, is very important: not to impose prematurely specializations. That leads us to
ask ourselves about which is the best moment to apply the transition in the formation of architects from general to specific.

One possibility would be to combine both in the training process, but not from sealed areas as usually happens, but from a common space and time of instruction, introducing them at the same time in the classroom. This procedure involves the notion of shared classroom with the dialogue between teachers of various specialties that make up the integrated architecture together in the classroom. Drawing, structural design, urbanism, construction, facilities, theory and project design taught sequentially but also simultaneously in the classroom, grouped by two or even three. It is from the conversation between the professors of the different disciplines that comes the transmission of knowledge, in a much closer approximation to the real situations in which architecture is produced.

Of course, education, Gadamer says, is to educate oneself and "self-education must above all consist in this, that where one perceives one's shortcomings, one strengthens one's own resources". In words of L. Aguilar [4]: "one educates oneself because, above all, learning depends on oneself; one is educated along with others because we are beings in conversation, in relation to others, we are in the communication, the game, the experiences that we exchange with the others. You educate yourself by educating not so much by what you achieve in others but by what happens to you in the encounter and communication with them. There is a fundamental reason to recognize that others are already present in our education in any of our experiences". This kind of recognition is strongly rooted in the design learning process, and the dichotomy between personal learning and social education always appears in the personal assessment of the student's project in the presence of the rest of the group.

These words remind us of the importance of self-learning in architecture: the value of books inviting us to discover in their pages plans and sections to be re-drawn. The dialog can be established with different interlocutors if we consider books as friends as Claude Roy did [5]. Gadamer speaks of awakening the pleasure of learning, and if this fundamental objective fails nothing remains in the learning process.

Further than the learning process itself, as L. Elvis [6] states: “Gadamer’s hermeneutic approach has several implications then for architecture and belonging. It gathers a work and its community together, creating a ‘fitting’ environ for hermeneutic dialogues to unfold”. This connection, this dialog between community and architecture re-appears successively in the recent decades and subsequently approaches the process of generating architecture to the dialog with the users further than the promoters.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The ability to be a specialist in different areas, in successive moments, already appears today as an added value in the formation of people. We can provide students with this capacity for personal transformation through character education and an education philosophy to help them carry it out. For the education of the architectural character we can continue to apply the four characteristics that, almost a century ago, Bertrand Russell chose: Vitality, courage, sensitivity and intelligence. In a world where information is increasingly immediate and accessible, and where it loses value without solid criteria to differentiate and process it, a possible philosophy for achieving our goals may be the one of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The notion of education through dialogue recovers for architecture the most human dimension. Teaching the capacity and, above all, the necessity of self-education as a means of personal transformation, certainly connects with the notion of the Architect as a specialist who is not measured by what he/she already knows but by his/her ability to learn and through that acquired knowledge to transform the world.

Now, more than ever, it is appropriate to remark the distinction between information, knowledge and wisdom. This distinction will help us to discover where is the equilibrium between general knowledge and professional specialization in the formation of architects.

REFERENCES


