I wish to start with a story. It is a story and not a history, because I have purposely not attempted to check its factual basis, enjoying the productive levity of stories over the cloying weight of history.

The story is of two Viennese architects, Siccardsburg and van den Nüll. Their masterpiece is to be the Vienna Opera House. The site is on the Ringstrasse, that compaction of historical time where Austro-Hungarian emperors rub noses with Italian popes, Greek democrats with Medieval burghers in a representational celebration of imperial power. The architects, as architects do, polish their project on the drawing board, rubbing the alchemy of geometry and proportion onto dumb lines in order to give them authority. These lines, now imbued with lasting life, are then rudely converted into instructions for builders, a direct transformation of subjective genius into objective action which typifies architectural production (and which in its very directness conflates architecture as idea with architecture as instrument). The construction of the opera house begins. After a few months, powers beyond deem it necessary to raise the Ringstrasse by one metre. Our two architects protest bitterly. Their lines will be violated, their proportions will be fatally wounded - it is the architectural equivalent of amputation. However, their protests are to no avail. Their marginally stunted (but for them massively distorted) building is opened by the Emperor. Imperial openings are full of small talk, and in one casual aside the Emperor remarks that the building is a bit squat. This comment is passed to the press who promptly and prominently announce that the building is officially too low. One of our architects reads his newspaper, goes home and hangs himself. (Such, as Wolf Prix wryly comments in his telling of the story, is the treatment of architects in Vienna). The Emperor, on hearing the news, disconsolately determines never to express his opinions in public again - an architectural lesson that Prince Charles may wish to learn.

The point of this story is that it beautifully illustrates the sense of fragility of architects and architecture in the face of wider forces and powers beyond. However, an acknowledgment of this fragility is too painful a step for architecture to take, because to do so would be to undermine the authoritative status that both the architectural profession and architectural pedagogy assume themselves to have. What I briefly wish to explore are some of the reasons behind the need for this status and the methods by which it is sustained. I will then argue that an acknowledgement of the fragile ground of architecture is a necessary catalyst for the reformulation of architectural practice and education. The argument may initially appear to be one of resigned pessimism, but it is meant in a spirit of determined, if critical, optimism.

It is a defining need of any profession to protect itself from the society of amateurs. An area of expertise is established, a knowledge base evolved and a boundary is formed. The amateur other is thereby excluded. In the so-called strong professions, say medicine and law, the boundaries become walls, the profession a citadel. In the so-called weaker professions, say psychotherapy and nursing, the boundaries are muddier and with a little effort it is possible to imagine the crossing of them. Society elevates the strong professions over the weak ones through economic reward.

A vivid enactment of these poles can be seen in the genre of the classic hospital soap. In a typical storyline, the doctor is confronted with a medical crisis - but something within the patient also touches on, and thereby exacerbates, a personal crisis that is torturing the doctor. In order to put a distance between this human level (so emotive, so amateur) the doctor brilliantly solves the crisis through technical expediency (so objective, so professional). The nurse, on the other hand is used as the conduit for human exchange with the patient, leading to an implied undermining of her professional status. The distance between the poles of the strong and weak medical professions is further established through stereotypes of gender, class and economics.[1]

It is difficult to precisely locate architecture on this crudely drawn line between strong and weak professions. Because of the lack of definition of an objective knowledge base, and also because of the unpredictability of the design process,

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1 The newer examples of this genre, such as Chicago Hope and Cardiac Arrest, brilliantly subvert some of the established social conventions, but play still harder the card of technical mystification. Cardiac Arrest also introduces a new profession, the health manager, whose only criterion is economics and who is there to be reviled by all other medical professions, weak and strong.

sociologists have identified architecture as somewhere in the middle. However, in an understandable attempt to gain societal status, and with it economic reward, the profession will always try to move towards the strong end of the spectrum. This move is achieved through two methods; the first is that of instrumental rationality, the second is that of aesthetic mystification. By the first method the profession attempts to provide a strong knowledge base, a defined area of rational principles with associated techniques, which only architects have the skill and knowledge to manipulate. A quote from Peter Eisenman gives explicit illustration of this action of professional legitimation: "When one denies the importance of function, programme, meaning, technology and the client - constraints traditionally used to justify and in a way support form-making - the rationality of process and the logic inherent in form become almost the last 'security' or legitimation available."[2] In order to make this field further unavailable to the amateur, it is overlaid with the myth of genius, whereby the architect alone, in an almost magical way can give aesthetic form to the rational principles. The idea of architect as artist plays an important part in establishing architectural culture to the outside world. It also affects the internal economy of the profession, with the 'star' architects underpaying their staff, but offering an osmotic relationship with artistry in return. With the two pincer movements of objective reason and subjective genius, professional closure is effected, even if they may at times be seen in competition to each other.[3]

In his book *The Culture of Professionalism,* Burton Bledstein identifies how the rise of the professions in the nineteenth century was paralleled and supported by the establishment of academic institutions. As Bledstein argues, academia legitimised the authority of the profession by "appealing to the the universality and objectivity of science. The fact that most Americans learned to associate the scientific way with

openness and fairness made the relationship convincing."[4] The academic institutions thereby became the places where the professional knowledge base was defined and given epistemological credence. It is now often argued that this relationship between education and profession is breaking down, in the much cited 'crisis' of rupture between theory and practice. But this appears to me to be a partial reading. As the demands of the academic marketplaces have shifted, the knowledge base has evolved. Academic theories may therefore have become less directly instrumental (and thereby less directly useful to a complaining profession), but nonetheless they remain tools of professional legitimation. It can be argued that the more obscure the theories have become, the more powerful they are in achieving professional closure. What may be identified in the current tendencies, led by the hegemony of elite American institutions who are presently controlling the cultural capital of architecture in the Anglophone world, is in fact a complicity between theory and practice which moves architecture to a remoter sanctuary of alienation and with it a higher degree of professional protection from the great unwashed beyond. The knowledge base may be sliding away from the objective ground of reason, but it remains autonomous and largely self referential.

And yet my Viennese example suggests that this autonomous knowledge base is not serving us so well. Robert Gutman in his book on the profession[5] acutely defines ten issues which the profession must face up to. Each of these issues is to a large extent new, thrown up by changing economic and cultural demands in society. Each of the issues to a greater or lesser extent challenges the paradigms of traditional architectural production. Gutman argues that, in order to survive, the profession must adapt. To his ten issues, each of us could add another ten and suddenly we have a crowd of contingent conditions with which architecture must deal. It is here that the fragility of architecture is revealed.

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2 Peter Eisenman, *House X* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 38.

3 This is obviously a generalisation. I have expanded on this theme in other writings, especially: Jeremy Till, "Contingent Theory: The Educator as Ironist," *Stoa* 1 (1996): 66–79, and J. Till, "Angels with Dirty Faces," *Scroope: Cambridge Architecture Journal* 7 (1995): 5–12. See also: Sarah Wigglesworth, "The Crisis of Professionalism," *Practices* 2 (1993): 12–17.

4 Burton J. Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W W Norton & Co Inc, 1978), 88.

5 Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice: A Critical View*, 5th ed. (Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).

Faced with this multiplicity there are two possible reactions. One is to retreat to still higher ground - to build higher walls around the profession. Sharpen the technique on the one hand, further mystify the aesthetic and intellectual production on the other. The current obsessions with technological determinism, aesthetic formalism and theoretical obfuscation would suggest that the retreat is in progress, even if these obsessions may be set against each other in architectural discourse. The other reaction is to engage with the multiplicity - to accept the fragility, but from here to exploit some of the residual cultural strength that I believe architecture still has.

Let me give relate a personal, and possibly narcissistic, example. I am sitting in the Cafe Prückel in Vienna writing this paper in my notebook. I look back over the pages of my notebook *and look out over the cafe.*

'Ein bier bitte'. pp1-3: notes on Henri Lefebvre's Production of Space. *A woman sits opposite me.* pp4-5: notes from a conference on a European Community programme for energy research (we are attempting to get funding for our strawbale house project). *Notice in snatched glances that the woman is clearly distraught; orders drink, does not touch it, trembling cigarette.* p6: list of books on time for Bartlett students. *'Noch ein bier'. Black tied waiter resolutely refuses to accept my bad German and sneeringly suggests 'Another beer?' in equally bad English.* pp7-8: sketches for our engineer Nick Hanika of a column as three-dimensional bicycle wheel. *Eye contact is made, hers is fleetingly on the way to the entrance door (a repetitive action).* p9: Notes for lectures in Vienna. Worried about denseness of language. *Waitress much more graciously brings water with no linguistic snarl-up.* pp10-11: Summary of day's review at Bartlett. What are we going to do with ****? *Object of her doorwards gaze has arrived, obviously late. He sits down next to me.* pp12-15. Minutes of meeting with arts consultants and a great choreographer (our client). Not much to do with the building, but necessary all the same. *Electric force field beside me.* p16 Scribbles trying to work out why Man Ray exhibition was so much more important than Hundertwasser exhibition. *Major tears on her part. Pathetic male reaction on his.* p22: I cannot possibly hope to master all these conditions (the immediate personal ones, the wider technical, cultural and professional ones) in a vain attempt to apply a singular knowledge base over them in order to order them. And yet I want to try to understand their multiplicity to help me in my putative attempts to be an architect. The tension is perfectly summarised in the split in the German language of the word knowledge into two: *erkenntnis* (a human, conditioned, evolving, force of understanding) versus *wissenschaft* (a professional, authoritative, fixity).

I am arguing that we can only hope to understand as architects, never to fully *know.* This demands a paradigm shift in which the illusion of a single, stable architectural knowledge base is relinquished and replaced by the acceptance of architectural *erkenntnisse.* Renaissance Man is replaced by baroque androgyny.

Of course this proposed shift presents an immediate challenge to the established paradigms of both academia and the profession. The academics will argue that it will be impossible to justify their institutional position if they do not have an authoritative knowledge base to work on. However, as long as they also cling to the other aspect of architectural production, that of intuitive genius, they will anyway attract the doubts of their academic colleagues (doubts sometimes manifested through ill-disguised scorn). The profession will argue that without a fixed knowledge base for them to control, they will lose status in the eyes of society. However, this status is being rapidly undermined anyway, a dilution that demands a more flexible response on the part of the profession. Interestingly, at the last York University conference on education and practice, it was the academics who clung to the idea of a knowledge base, whilst it was a practitioner, Chris Colbourne, who took a less dogmatic line. He cites five expectations that he has for architecture graduates:

 A broad awareness of issues beyond building buildings.
 An ability to communicate.
 An understanding of professionalism.
 A philosophical position and a design approach.
 An understanding of when and how to obtain relevant information.

Interestingly he does not cite technical competence (a normal rallying cry for practitioners) or traditional architectural skills such as planning. Colbourne's position,

with which I have great sympathy, might suggest new approaches to education. It would not be concerned with a prescriptive, authoritative knowledge base (with associated methods), but rather with structuring ways of thinking within which the individual student finds his or her own critical space. This is not to argue for the abandonment of the skills and techniques of design of and technology, nor for the loss of history and precedent, but it is to argue that such aspects should be seen as means and not ends - means towards shaping a more flexible response to the condition of architecture based around the idea of *erkernntnis*. There may be a danger that such an approach may lead to relativism, in which a number of competing stances are given equal status with no way of choosing between them - or else with little direct relevance to architecture. This may be avoided by always setting the discussion within an expanded architectural context and then seeing *erkertnis* as leading to intent and then action. It is this inclusion of intentional action that demands a critical response from the student in which they need to position themselves socially and politically in relation to the issues at stake. I have called this pedagogical approach 'contingent theory'[6], arguing that a practice which is shaped by contingent forces should be informed by a theory which can accept contingency.

The work carried out with my teaching partner, Ro Spankie, in Unit 22 at the Bartlett has attempted to put such an approach into action. At Ro's instigation, we have opened up to the scale of the city, because that is where the shifting forces that the future architect will face are most apparent. This year we are working in and around Heathrow Airport. In my education we would first have studied the structure, form and function of other airports. But this is to remain within the citadel of architecture caught gazing at the polished, autonomous artifacts of precedent. Almost certainly we would have been pointed to Peter Buchanan's extraordinary devotion (in every sense of the word) of a whole issue of *Architectural Review* to Renzo Piano's Kansai Airport, pages of luscious text and imagery with hardly a word about the wider economic or cultural structures which gave rise to this 'masterpiece' (nor one word about the airport as the 'operational disaster' that one of Heathrow's senior managers described it to us as). Instead of this use of airport precedent, we are asking the Unit to

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6 See Till, "Contingent Theory: The Educator as Ironist", Op. Cit. note 4.

interrogate Heathrow as a city model, identifying how it manifests, controls, suppresses typical urban conditions. The results are extraordinary, suggesting that Heathrow is a privatised city state, with the owners, British Airports Authority, operating as a quasi-autonomous government accountable to nobody except their institutional shareholders. As a city model it can be identified, in my bleaker moments, as a dystopian vision of what is soon to come.

So what does this have to do with architecture, I may hear people think. Everything. Because without a recognition of these cultural conditions (and in particular urban conditions), how can one hope to approach the problem of architecture except on architecture's terms. It is in the confrontation with forces beyond architecture that intent can be structured. One must be aware of the expanded field, with its maelstrom of political, economic and social forces, in order to know how to operate within it. It is here that I believe my argument is optimistic, because the intentional action must surely be redemptive, but not in a naively utopian manner because the action always works with, or sometimes against, existing conditions. It is only by looking over the self-defined walls of the profession that the subject of architecture can be reinvigorated; without this opening up, I believe that architecture will be increasingly marginalised.

I believe that the move towards the idea of architectural knowledges should begin in the schools. Education not as the imposition of static methods, but rather as a way of structuring thinking in a dynamic architectural context. The profession will argue that this will not be directly useful for practice, so we shall also give them students with skills (computers, techniques, etc), but much more importantly we shall give them students who are able to react critically and creatively to the radically contingent world of practice. In the openness to the forces that shape society and in an acknowledgement of our fragility in the face of them, we can move towards a conditioned response unburdened by dreams of utopia. Using my previous example-architects as doctors or nurses? Society is telling us quite clearly through its economic rewards and cultural identification - NURSES. I do not see this at all as a position of weakness; extending the analogy further than it deserves, the actions of nurses are humanly conditioned, socially embedded, contingently informed but also remarkably

tough.[7] Perhaps it would have been better for my two Viennese architects to join me in the café rather than making the ultimate sacrifice on the high altar of Architecture.

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7 See for example, Patricia Benner, "The Role Of Articulation In Understanding Practice And Experience As Sources Of Knowledge In Clinical Nursing", in James Tully and Daniel M. Weinstock, eds., *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 136 –159.