

I wish to begin this essay by quoting from two widely differing sources. The first is the so-called mission statement from one of the new Universities in Britain:

Mission of Kingston University: 'To provide career-related higher education, advanced training and research for the development of individuals and organisations in support of the economy and society.'¹

The second quote is concerns education in ancient Greece:

In the Socratic model, all society (by definition) is corrupt, and all education (by definition) must be a resistance to society.²

These quotations outline two very different ideas as to what the eventual end of education is. In one model, the educational institute is seen as a place to train students to passively accept and enter the status quo that society presents. In the other, the role of the academy or the teacher is seen to educate students to actively challenge and change the status quo. This paper investigates these two models and the implications that each has for the way that we may teach architecture.

The words of the mission statement may be emotive to most liberal educators, particularly when one learns that they are published in the 'Kingston University Corporate Plan'. The idea that education is some kind of industry in which raw materials (students) are repetitively moulded into products that serve the economic structures of society is antithetical to most teachers' beliefs. Indeed most of our actions as architectural educators would seem to resist this model of normative training. The humanist basis of most architectural education focuses on the role of the individual in society in the belief that such education will induce a democratic responsibility in our students which transcends the pressures of corporatism and of the technical society that they will eventually enter.

¹ Kingston University Corporate Plan (1994): 5

² As quoted by the architect Daniel Libeskind. See also: Henry Teloch, *Socratic Education in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Notre Dame: 1986).

However, a closer inspection of the wider forces that control education may reveal that this essentially liberal belief is unfounded. In a vocational discipline such as architecture, education is shaped not only by the pressures of society, but also by the paradigms of the profession itself. In nearly all countries, architectural education is regulated by the profession. The tension set up between the academic demands of the educational institute and the vocational demands of the profession is seen by many educators to compromise their position (though as I will explain later the academy and the profession form an implicit alliance in order to protect their respective territories). The imposition of professional regulation means that in many ways we are forced to accept and carry out the Kingston mission statement, namely to produce students in support of existing professional requirements, be they economic, technical or ideological. Before initiating a critique of education, it is therefore necessary first to explore the paradigms that shape the profession.

PROFESSIONAL CLOSURE

It is in the nature of professions to erect boundaries in order to protect themselves and maintain their authority over society. Every profession, and architecture is no exception, jealously guards a specialised area of knowledge which they alone are in a position to define and thereby control. Burton Bledstein in his *Culture of Professionalism* summarises the condition of unchallenged authority:

.. they (professionals) attempted to define a total coherent system of necessary knowledge within a precise territory, to control the intrinsic relationships of their study by making it a scholarly as well as an applied science, to root social existence in the inner needs and possibilities of documentable worldly processes.³

In this way, the professions asserted their influence over society; as time passed the barriers became more impenetrable and the knowledge within appeared

³ 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. He is referring here to the rise of the professions in C19 USA, but the model can be seen to apply equally to Europe.

more mystical and unobtainable to the excluded amateurs. Central to the process is its self-defining nature, whereby the knowledge base and associated problems are defined by the professions in order that they (and they alone) may better solve the problem.

In the case of architecture two particular ideologies are called upon to define the area of specialisation. In one, the technical-rational, the architect is seen as the possessor of objective knowledge with which he can solve the problems of the world. In the other, the ideology of the aesthetic, the architect is seen as the possessor of intrinsic subjective genius which she can silently call upon to shape the world. Where some have found architectural theory and practice unrigorous is when this aspect of intuition enters into the area of architectural production.⁴ There is an argument that anything that relies on subjective response cannot have the same legitimacy as an objective, rational solution. However, this is to misunderstand the way that intuition is used in architecture schools and in the profession as a tool of strength. The cult of the genius, to which the idea of intuition is inextricably linked, is encouraged in order to add a level of mystique on top of the rational basis of production. These two *together* make the professional base of architecture unassailable. On the one hand we can resort to objective truths and facts to justify ourselves and on the other hand, when these begin to fail us, we can point to higher ground of intrinsic genius.⁵

4 Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness* (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1974), 144 comment that "Architecture has little tradition of scholarship...neither in the literature nor in the consumption of architecture do architects spend much time with the theories that underlie their buildings.". They put this down to the mystique of intuition, though in another book, *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schön champions the method by which architects come to terms with their initial intuitive moves as an example of 'reflection in practice'.

5 This procedure mirrors Enlightenment idealism. As Horkheimer notes, Kant's retreat into an idealism structured by the rational mind is: "...two sided. Supreme unity and purposefulness on the one hand and their obscurity, unknownness and impenetrability on the other. This contradiction has filled the form of human activity in the twentieth century." Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory" in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* (New York: 1972), 204.

It is between these poles that professional closure is effected. In the objective realm (which I will focus on for the rest of the paper), the profession employs rational methods to define its knowledge base. As Sarah Wigglesworth notes:

In the area of objective knowledge, professional institutions dominate the epistemological foundation of architecture by an appeal to the scientific and instrumental bases of learning. Its positivist orientation reveals itself in a variety of ways, ranging from taxonomies of architectural form (typologies) and the conception of architecture as a primarily quantifiable and calculable discipline (structures and construction), to the fragmentation of the discipline into defined sub-specialities.⁶

Central to this *modus operandi* is the gradual evolution of systematic methods of architectural production, as seen in the codification of representation, prescriptive design methods and quantified buildings. These methods engender in the profession a set of normative procedures with the result that, in Samuel Weber's terms: "professionalism is construed not merely as a set of learned values, as an integral system, but, more to the point as a set of habitual *responses*." ⁷ In this light, it can be seen that the controlling paradigm within the architectural profession becomes one of rationally justified, reproducible, techniques acquired by a few in order to effect professional closure. It is this paradigm which to a large extent shapes the way we teach architecture.

THE PROFESSION AND EDUCATION

In order for a profession to achieve real authority, its techniques have to be validated; it cannot rely simply on the effectiveness of its actions. This need for legitimation is explained by Argyris and Schön, who argue that: "A profession not only has a practice, but a theory of action, in which that practice can become a

6 Sarah Wigglesworth, "The Crisis of Professionalism," *Practices 2* (1993): 14.

7 Samuel Weber, "The Limits of Professionalism," in *Institution and Interpretation, Theory and History of Literature 31* (1987): 25.

reproducible, *valid* technique."⁸ The profession looks to the schools to provide two things. First is the inculcation of the normative responses that Weber refers to; the second is the theoretical validation of the techniques of practice. The schools may grumble at the first (since it constitutes training rather than education), but jump at the opportunity of the second, because it formulates the area of another type of professionalism, namely academic.

In his book *The Culture of Professionalism*,⁹ Burton Bledstein charts the rise of the professions in nineteenth century USA, and argues that higher education was seminal in shaping the culture of the professional. Crucially, he identifies how the rise in the professions was reliant on an equivalent growth in the stature of the academic profession and of educational institutions; Academia legitimised the authority of the profession by "appealing to the universality and objectivity of science. The fact that most Americans learned to associate the scientific way with democratic openness and fairness made the relationship convincing."¹⁰ The professions demanded, and still do demand, that the theories developed in schools have a rational basis. The schools are more than happy to comply, in the belief that the rational way is the way to truth and pure knowledge - exemplars that underpin their own profession.

The role of schools has thus developed to provide the theory on which the actions of practice are based. In this manner, they become complicit in reinforcing and maintaining the paradigms and procedures of the architectural profession, whilst at the same vindicating the workings of their own profession. Academia far from being compromised by the demands of practice, forms a mutually convenient alliance which upholds the status quo. We are reminded of the Kingston University Mission statement.

⁸ Argyris and Schön, *Theory in Practice*, 149.. The italics are mine.

⁹ See note 4.

¹⁰ Burton Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism* (New York, 1976), 124.

THE MIRROR OF RATIONAL THEORY

As Bledstein notes, the process of legitimation depends on a certain rationality in the theories formulated in academia. Although the scientific basis of architectural education has often been obscured by issues of style and taste, rationally based theory has been with us ever since Durand.¹¹ Particularly in the post-war era, there has been a concentration on rational teaching. Functionalism, rationalism, morphologies, typologies, constructional techniques - all these and more underpin in one way or another the educational programmes of architectural schools throughout Europe. Even questions of style have been harnessed into a positivist framework by the rise of historicist architectural writing. Whilst they are often set in a humanist framework and generally employed in the name of the greater good of mankind, architecture schools are essentially grounded in rational thought and methodology.

Whatever guise it may assume, rational theory possesses a number of common characteristics. The first is that it can be validated; it proceeds down a linear path of hypothesis - experiment - proof. A second characteristic is that the theory can be turned a method. A third characteristic is that the theory can be continually refined; it is always in pursuit of the perfect solution. Finally, there is an underlying assumption that the theory tends towards defining or revealing immutable universals. All of these characteristics make rational theory eminently suitable as a model of instruction within schools of architecture. A clear intellectual framework is provided and the student guided through it in a linear manner. The teacher maintains his or her authority by always being one step ahead of the student on the linear path, one step nearer the revelation of a universal truth. The destination and method are always within the control of the teacher, while the students cannot assume any individual responsibility as they are caught in the tramlines of linear methodology.

Theories can thus be seen to operate in two ways. The first is as a guide and legitimation for practice and the second as a framework for academic instruction. In both cases a closed circuit is set up. The parameters which the theory addresses are

¹¹ see in particular: Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (MIT Press, 1985) for an impassioned critique of this way of thinking.

defined by the alliance of profession and academia. As we have seen above, the self-defining nature is a means of maintaining authority, in the one instance over society, in the other over students. Teachers set the problems and provide the means to solve them. The fact that theories are developed in artificial environments means that their behaviour become entirely predictable. As Argyris and Schön note;

..techniques make self-fulfilling prophecies for the professions. These techniques tend to be used to achieve a self-reinforcing system that maintain constancy...The artificial environments are designed to enable the professions to realise objectives as he sees them control the task, render the behaviour of others predictable, and thereby control it.¹²

The same level of control is equally apparent in the profession of the teacher.

It may be seen therefore that self-defining rational theory also leads to self-fulfilling theory. Nietzsche is withering in his critique of the rational mind's pursuit of the truth and its apparent limitations:

If somebody hides a thing behind a bush, seeks it out and finds it in the self-same place, then there is not much to boast of respecting this seeking and finding; thus, however, matters stand with the pursuit of seeking and finding 'truth' within the realm of reason.¹³

What this points to is the dangers of the closed circuit. Theory guides practice which in turn becomes the basis for theory; at best this a refining process in pursuit of the perfected theory defining a universal truth; at worst it becomes like a dog chasing his tail.

This system generates a mirroring effect, whereby the precepts of the theory are reflected in the actions of practice. A simple example of this may be seen in the work of Aldo Rossi. The early theory is developed as a teacher and then applied to the first buildings; these then become illustrative proof of the later theories. Rossi is quite explicit in the defining of this self-reinforcing system¹⁴, and conflates the theory and practice by describing the book as a project. The autonomous nature of Rossi's theory

12 Argyris and Schön, *Theory in Practice*, 151–2.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Falsity in their Extramoral Sense" in Warren A. Shibles, *Essays on Metaphor* (Language Press, 1972), 7.

14 See Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1981).

clearly makes it susceptible to such an analysis of theory and practice in a mirroring relationship, but the effect can be seen in all rationally based theories. Take functionalism, which though dismissed by Rossi as 'naive', is purportedly based on scientific principles. The effective functioning of buildings is a pillar of architectural education. Countless student schemes have been made to stand or fall on the basis of functionalist arguments. Quite what makes one building function better than another is never fully defined, but quantifiable aspects such as circulation, areas, anthropometrics and sunlight are brought to the fore in functionalist analysis. These aspects are gradually refined into a theory, which then becomes the basis for the design of buildings in practice. One only has to look to the pervasiveness of design guides based on quantifiable data and evidence, to see this. The buildings which then result from this methodology then become the paradigms of instruction in the schools.

In this self-fulfilling world, the ideal system is seen to be reached when the reflection is perfect. The task of the academic is to polish the mirror¹⁵, to refine the theories. In order to do this the theories must remove themselves from the contingencies of real practice. It is in this detachment that their eventual downfall lies.

THE LESSON OF THALES

The story of Thales relates how the early Greek philosopher was walking one night gazing at the stars. So absorbed was he in his study of the world beyond, that he did not see a well in front of him. He fell in, causing a watching maid to burst into laughter. The normal interpretation of this story portrays the dangers of pure philosophy (as represented by Thales) when it becomes detached from practice (represented by the maid).¹⁶ The pursuit of pure theory reflecting itself in the polished mirror has the same dangers. The detachment leads to the illusion that systematic

15 I take this analogy directly from Richard Rorty's seminal book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) in which reveals the fallibility of systematic philosophy as being trapped by the beauty of its own self-reflective gaze.

16 See Marco Frascari, "Maidens 'Theory' and 'Practice' at the Sides of Lady Architecture," *Assemblage* 7 (1991): 14–27.

theories can be formulated which will move towards (or reveal) universal truths. Traditional theory is not related to the particularities of human life, but is involved in the defining of a series of supposed truths in order to support the idea that there is a foundational system to all existence.

However, the theory which purports to be universal is also one, ironically, that excludes. Whilst a rational theory obviously functions on its own terms, it can only do so by excluding other factors. Rational theory assumes that the world can be reduced to a series of coded, methodical systems. Distortions which do not fit the system of technical rationality are dismissed in the search for predictable behaviour. The result is one of assumed neutrality in which the particular condition is subjugated to the power of the universal. The area which can be subjected to instrumental theory is actually circumscribed (limited) by that very theory. As suggested above, architecture is restricted to a technique - a method of problem solving in which the rational basis of production excludes a whole range of issues which are considered irrational, poetic, political or subjective.

Whilst such methodology may be appropriate in autonomous disciplines such as mathematics, the implications for a vocation such as architecture are more worrying. Architecture is by its very nature a contingent discipline, shaped by a range of forces beyond the control of a systematic method. We cannot account for the eventual occupation of buildings; we cannot predict the whim of the client in the design process; we cannot stop the rain dirtying the perfection of our facades; we cannot control the political and economic structures that shape the way buildings are procured and occupied; we cannot.....the list is endless.

We ignore these contingent conditions at our peril. Robert Gutman in his book on architectural practice¹⁷ traces the way that whilst the architectural profession has held to a set of foundational beliefs, the world has moved on. The paradigms mentioned earlier, and their reflection in the schools, have not proved flexible enough to accommodate the wider changes beyond the immediate sphere of the self-defined discipline of architecture. Gutman lays the blame at the feet of both profession and the

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

schools and insists that they need to throw off some of their entrenched views as to what constitutes the basis of architecture. Without such changes, the undermining of architecture by other forces and professions, a process which has already begun, will be escalated.

In order to survive, it will be necessary to relinquish the illusion that a pure, rational theory of architecture may exist, and instead engage with the distortions and vicissitudes of the real world. Philosophers through the ages provide with support for such move. From Aristotle (“Nor is practical wisdom concerned with the universal only, it must also recognise the particulars”¹⁸) through to Ricoeur (“It is a great illusion to think that one could make oneself a pure spectator, without weight, without memory.. and regard everything with equal concern”¹⁹), the arguments for a contingent theory are compelling.

CONTINGENT THEORY

Someone said recently that virtual reality would never look believable until they learned how to put some dirt into it.²⁰ Following this sentiment I would argue that for an architectural theory to have any validity, it must be able to accept the existence of dirt. It is theory such as this, one which can accommodate the peculiarities of human praxis, that I term *contingent* theory. In order to embrace such theory, the architectural academic (and associated students) and the professional must move from being detached observers to engaged citizens.

The distinction between the life of the pure philosopher and that of the citizen devoted to political praxis was first identified by Aristotle. He defines three types of knowledge. Theoretical knowledge (which is concerned with the eternal and unchanging), practical knowledge or *phronesis* (which deals with human action) and

18 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 7, 1114b.

19 Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil* (Beacon Press, 1986), 306.

20 quoted by William Gibson in “Disneyland with the Death Penalty” in *Observer Magazine* (London: 14 Aug. 1994), 15. Gibson thinks the author of the quote is the American performer Laurie Anderson.

productive knowledge or *techne* (which is concerned with making).²¹ Aristotle notes that pure theory produces nothing by itself, but is knowledge for its own sake. He therefore points to the importance of *phronesis* in understanding human experience. *Phronesis* is not seen as a precise science which can accurately predict human actions, but is shaped through experience. There is an underlying assumption that human action is contingent and does not lend itself to precise knowledge. As Aristotle notes: “We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline”.²² *Phronesis* is not seen as an instrumental theory to direct practice, but as knowledge accumulated from experience - knowledge which is then fed back into guide and judge the actions of praxis. For this to occur, Aristotle argues that the philosopher must have experience in the real world in order to form a basis for judgement. The boundary between theory and practice disappears to create a hybrid practising theorist/ theorising practitioner. This hybrid operator oscillates between retreat and engagement with the world of praxis.

Following from this concept, the contingent theory that I am proposing is not one that is directly *useful* - it does not order or predict actions. Rather, it is a means of engaging as a human with the wider forces that shape architecture. In this model society is not seen as a neutral backdrop responding to a set of universal rules, but as a dynamic set of actions and structures. In the critical interpretation of these structures, the contingent architectural theorist/practitioner begins to unmask the forces and dominant ideologies that shape the production of buildings - and through this uncovering is in a better position to adjust to the variable conditions that face each and every project.

A criticism of contingent theory may be that because it is founded on a critique of rationality it is necessarily irrational. An easy rebuttal of this would be to say that this criticism is based on dialectical thinking, and such thinking has been found

21 see Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967) chapters 1 & 2 and Terence Ball, “Plato and Aristotle; The Unity Versus the Autonomy of Theory and Practice” in Terence Ball, *Political Theory and Praxis: New Perspectives* (University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 64 – 68.

22 Aristotle, op cit., 1,3,1094b.

wanting. However this is evasive.²³ Contingent theory does not dismiss rational theory out of hand, but points to its limitations and sees it as but one human project amongst many. Another related criticism is that contingent theory tends towards relativism - that it sets up a series of possibilities with no way of choosing between them. But this is to misunderstand the political responsibility that contingent theory places on its practitioners as engaged citizens. It demands them to position themselves in relation to other individuals, and in this to define their own political and ethical nature. These are not positions of neutrality, but ones in which judgements and informed choice must be made. Architecture is a public action, and to deny the political implications is in the end to accept the status quo and its conservative, dominant structures.

I will end this section by quoting from the political theorist Sheldon Wolin. Faced with “a world (which) has become the product of theories about human structures deliberately created rather than historically articulated”²⁴, Wolin proposes a new type of theory which reassembles the past systematic theories in a radically different way. It presents:

A new way of looking at the familiar world, a new way with its own cognitive and normative standards.... It is not an argument between theories that are normative and those that are not, but between those theories which restrict the ‘reach’ of theory by dwelling on facts which were selected by what were assumed to be the functional requisites of the existing paradigm, and those who believe that experience and facts are richer than theories, and that it is the task of the theoretical imagination to restate new possibilities.²⁵

Finally, Wolin describes the new theory as: “not only a structure of formal features, but also as a structure of intentions.”²⁶ It is this last sentiment that resonates

23 Richard Rorty uses this argument to pre-empt the critics of his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For a critique of Rorty’s argument and the apolitical nature of the evasiveness and the book as a whole, see Richard J. Bernstein, “Rorty’s Liberal Utopia,” in *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 258 –292.

24 Sheldon Wolin, “Political Theory as Vocation” in Martin Fleisher and Conference for the Study of Political Thought, *Machiavelli and the Nature of Political Thought* (Taylor & Francis, 1973), 73.

25 Ibid., 74.

26 Ibid., 68.

directly with the idea of contingent theory as laying the ground for responsible architectural action.

THE EDUCATOR AS IRONIST

If contingency is against the intrinsic nature of things and their subsequent ordering through the imposition of systematic method, then it follows that contingency removes one of the central planks of traditional education. Traditional education is founded on a certain set of assumed truths and it is the task of the traditional educator to provide the methods for the student to acquire knowledge of those truths. We have seen how rational theory sets in place a linear process in which the teacher assumes power as possessor of knowledge further down the track than the student and also as provider of the means to acquire that knowledge. Education is reduced to the accumulation of technical skills and facts, set in a framework of systematic method that allows the student no room for manoeuvre. In architecture, release from this rational order is found by recourse to the level of intuition, but even this is then subjected to the rigours of rational analysis. Wolin notes that an education based on technique “affects the way the initiate will see the world, especially the political portion of it.”²⁷ The alleged neutrality of rational method results in an uncritical view of the world forming at an early stage.

We have seen, however, how this type of education is not serving our students very well. The inflexible nature means that in a contingent discipline like architecture the world has moved on and students are not educated to respond to the changes. It is as if the childhood educational game of matching triangular/circular/square wooden blocks to their respectively shaped holes has turned into a nightmare in which only hexagonal holes are provided and the kid sits screaming in impotent, indignant, fury.

It is futile to give the child hexagonal blocks or more shapes beyond - to attempt to provide the student with more facts and wider knowledge, because the targets are continually on the move. An alternative is to look at education not as the acquisition of facts, but as a way to realise how those facts may affect the way that we

²⁷ Ibid., 28.

live. Plato and Aristotle shared the ideal of education being a means of learning to live the good (ethical) life. Whilst this may sound a lofty concept in the late-twentieth century, it is appropriate for architecture, in which the products are not neutral objects but constituents of an inhabited political realm. The potential architect should begin to define their place as responsible (ethical) citizens within that structure. Education thus becomes, in Wolin’s terms, not a structure of formal features, but the means of discovering a structure of intentions.

For this change to occur, architectural educators will have to move from their present position as masters of truth and method to that of ironists. I use here Richard Rorty’s definition of ironist as:

.the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her most own most central beliefs and desires - someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance.²⁸

To relinquish the hold on foundational knowledge and its associated power is the act of the generous educator - but as we shall see, the route of the ironist is not very comfortable for the student either.

SOCRATES IN THE STUDIO

I have argued that architectural education should not be concerned with the imposition of method but in the drawing out an individual position from each student. A means to do this is through the call and response of Socratic dialogue, whereby a continued questioning results to the students revealing first of all their own ignorance, but then moving to find a considered response to that ignorance. Socratic method is misused today as a means of dogmatically moving towards a set of universal truths - the rationale of the dialectic justifying the didactic nature of the eventual conclusion. This misses the point that Socrates himself denied the existence of certain

²⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, xv.

knowledge, and because of this disavowed the fact that he was a teacher.²⁹ The Socrates of the early dialogues is, however, an educator in the sense of being an ironist. Nehamas notes that:

“Socrates in the early dialogues is light and sensitive all the way down. Though he insists on following his own dialectical method, he is constantly expressing his willingness to re-examine his views and to review his arguments.”³⁰

This approach has been termed Socratic irony - a pretence of ignorance and doubt as a means of teasing, mocking, perplexing the adversary into joining Socrates in his quest for personal improvement.

The uncertain path of such questioning makes it an uncomfortable pedagogical device for student and teacher alike. A protagonist in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* likens the effect of this type of learning to being bitten by bedbugs that drink his blood and torture his genitals.³¹ The pain and lack finality of the method attracts criticism of it as purely negative - discussing, observing but not proposing. However, this criticism is only valid if one holds to the belief that education must inevitably direct towards a given end. My suggestion, is that the employment of Socratic irony is a means of promoting a type of attitude and personal responsibility which structures a set of intentions.

The ironist finds their natural home in the design studio, where each project is subjected to a continual dialogue. The aim is not just, as Donald Schön argues,³² to

29 see Alexander Nehamas, “What Did Socrates Teach and To Whom Did He Teach It?,” *Review of Metaphysics* 46, no. 2 (1992): 288–290. Indeed this disavowal was the main platform of his defence - because if did not teach how could be accused of corrupting the youth of Athens. see also Gregory Vlastos, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985): 1–31.

30 Nehamas, “What Did Socrates Teach and To Whom Did He Teach It?,” 288.

31 Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, 700ff.

32 Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 51ff. Schön’s book is an important study of the professional/academic relationship, and uses the architecture studio as a .example of what he calls reflection in practice - a means of overcoming the technical-rational framework that he sees limiting the professions. However, his analysis of the architectural method is limited by an acceptance of the first intuitive

make sense of the intuitive processes which designers bring to situations of uncertainty and uniqueness. The teasing and probing also reveals the underlying prejudices and assumptions that the designer may have, and encourages a critical interpretation of these assumptions. It is only when the potential architect is aware of the prejudices and structures that control both them and society at large, that they are in a position to do anything about them. The question “Why is it like that”, cannot be answered with a simple “Why not?” (since this privileges the realm of intuition) nor with a simple technical reason (since that will be undermined by the ironist’s next response). In the successful Socratic dialogue, the roles of questioner and questioned should merge, as the student begins to build a *self*-critical response to the conditions with which they are faced and so begin to form their own judgements and intentions. The greatest triumph, but also the greatest sacrifice, for a teacher is to be no longer needed. This is the eventual aim of the educator as ironist.

AN EVERYDAY EXAMPLE

I am aware that so far this essay has remained at the level of the general, providing few examples to illustrate the thrust of the argument. In conclusion, I wish to briefly outline one example of the ideas in action. The example is that of an investigation into an urban area done by students in my studio at the Bartlett, University College London. The investigation was done at the scale of the miniature, looking into urban issues at a small scale rather at the large scale (block plans, detached vision) usually employed.

Large scale urban investigation assumes certain tendencies. The formal devices of the figure ground, the diagram, the zone and the type all contain the investigation within tidy boundaries and engender a certain type of quasi-scientific analysis, in which questions of quantity are addressed before those of quality. Eventually the city is reduced to a series of codes in which the issue of content is bypassed. The codes are by their very nature reductive and exclusive. The scale excludes the realm of the

moves as having inherent worth and then the teacher acting in dogmatic manner in the questioning of the student - leading her down a prescribed path.

body, the graphic excludes the social and political, and the rational method excludes the imaginative, the suppressed & the irrational. The authority of the large scale plan is ruthless in what it ignores, suppresses or overrules. The city as a master plan is not seen as a melting pot of inhabitable differences, but as a system which is there to be controlled. As a pedagogic device, the Masterplan assumes all the rationalist tendencies (and inherent fallacies) discussed above.

In these circumstances, designers see themselves not as citizens but as detached orderers. The will to order is of such a strength that, even if an ordering system is not immediately apparent in an existing urban situation, abstract codes and methods will be employed so as to reveal one - or in fact impose one. Whilst the intentions behind the ordering may be benign and well-founded, their method of operation is not. The removal of the operator from a personal involvement in their construct inevitably leads to a structure of power being imposed.

However, such methods of urban investigation remain the norm within architecture schools. A set of urban strategies (typological, formal, quantifiable) are legitimated through intellectual reasoning, but in fact manifest themselves as procedural methods. As we have seen, the teacher is placed in a position of power as master of the method, whilst the student is not able to develop individual responsibility or awareness under the imposition of rational structures.

THE URBAN MINIATURE

In response to these limitations, it was felt useful to develop methods of investigation and representation which can deal with the content of the city and its political and social life - methods which move beyond the detached & quantifiable and place the designer within the contingencies of life on the ground. One such method may be what was termed by the studio, *The Urban Miniature*.³³ an inquiry

33 These ideas are developed at greater length in my Jeremy Till, "The Urban Miniature," in *The Urban Scene and the History of the Future* (presented at the ACSA European Conference, London: ACSA, 1994), 239–241.

into the city at a scale of the miniature which collapses the purported urban order into its (in)constituent parts.

Within the studio, the miniature became the site of political and social investigation. This required a viewing of the miniature not as a detached fragment but as part of an open urban construct. What happens, for instance, if an entrance door is considered not as a materially defined component, but as an urban artefact, i.e. as an object which is subject to the full range of urban social forces? What wider issues are manifested in the door and how may it reflect the superimposition of a series of political and social issues? How does the way that a person engage with the door have implications for their engagement at the level of the city? Many, if not all of these aspects, would be impossible to investigate at the large scale.

Crucial to this operation of the urban miniature is that it demands the designer to assume responsibility for the decisions made. Lefebvre, the great philosopher of the everyday, notes: "Such are the varied aspects of the everyday: fluctuations beneath stable masks and appearances of stability, the need to make decisions and judgements".³⁴ The idea of the designer as maker of decisions and judgements is very different from the rational procedures of the normal urban investigation. In these models, a linear trajectory guided by formal and functionalist criteria relieves the burden of judgement. The rationalist system abrogates the responsibility, whilst the urban miniature confronts the designer with the society in which they must eventually operate, and in this moment of personal confrontation decisions must be made. The studio employed Socratic irony as a means of teasing out, criticising and refining the position of each student, so that each faced up to their own responsibility as citizens in a way that was intellectually justified. Twenty different propositions resulted, each rigorously reflecting an individual stance.

34 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 1991), 15.

AN EVERYDAY CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I wish to cite the reaction of philosophers to Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*:

So the professional philosophers generally ignored the book; for - starting with its title - it entailed relinquishing the traditional image of the philosopher as master and ruler of existence, witness and judge of life *from the outside*, enthroned above the masses, above the moments lost in triviality, 'distinguished' by an attitude and a distance.³⁵

This description of the philosopher has striking similarities with the image of the architect. It is likely that the same resistance to relinquishing a source of power may be encountered in the architectural school and profession. The distance of rational theory has a certain comfort. The logic of a linear method of investigation smoothes out difficulties. Architects have power because they know the rules. And yet that power can corrupt.

Lefebvre's response to his critics is clear and precise:

Philosophers (*architects*) and philosophy (*architecture*) can no longer be isolated, disguised, hidden. And this is precisely because everyday life is the supreme court where wisdoms, knowledge and power are brought to judgement".

The world of the everyday can be seen as a fertile ground for the development of what I have called contingent theory, a place where the educator as ironist situates students with a view to drawing out of them an empowering form of architectural praxis.

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³⁵ Ibid., 5 (Lefebvre's emphasis).