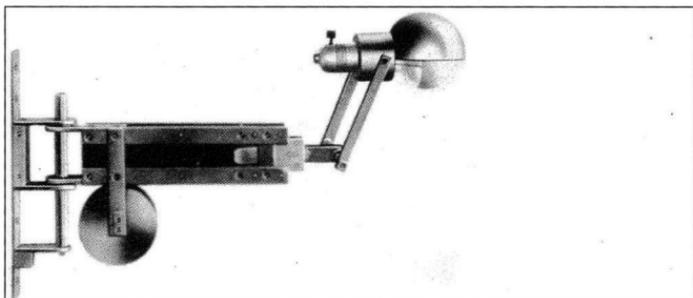


A Modernist Education

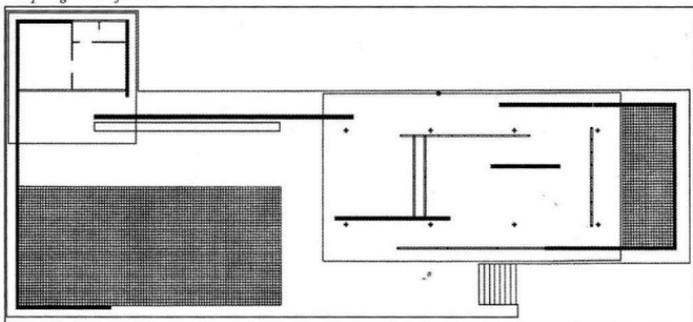
Last weekend I was at an Urban Design conference in New York, organized by Columbia and Harvard and put on by the Van Alen Institute, where I felt like the whipping boy for New Urbanism amongst the modernists. This weekend, I feel like the whipping boy for the Modernist Model amongst the new urbanists! While there are certainly many problems with the Modernist Model of architectural education, I do think it's worthwhile to talk about, both because it is so dominant today, and I would propose, because there are some babies we don't want to throw out with the bath water.

When Stephanie Bothwell asked me to make this presentation, I thought she wanted me to talk about the neo-avant-garde model of education so prevalent in schools today. She said, no, it's really important that we understand the break that the modernists made with the classical tradition. To do that requires starting with the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns in the late seventeenth century – and everything since in fifteen minutes! I'll apologize in advance for my broad strokes.

The quarrel of the ancients and the moderns occurred with the founding of the Royal Academy in Paris, which then became the Ecole de Beaux Arts, which – apologies to the Academy of San Luca – is usually considered the very first school of formal instruction in architecture. The quarrel arose over the question of whether beauty and harmony were absolute or relative. Contrary to “the ancients” belief in the classical orders as divine, fixed, universal standards defining the correct and only way to build beautifully, Claude Perrault, the physician turned architect, became the spokesman for “the Moderns,” suggesting that harmony in architecture does not have the unquestioned rightness which Vitruvius, Scripture, and philosophy had taken for granted, and proposing that there were different kinds of beauty. Perrault argued that in addition to the “positive beauty” demonstrated by the timeless principles and anthropomorphic proportions embodied in the orders, there were also varied systems of “arbitrary beauty” that were formed by fashionable inclinations, different cultures, and taste. Because any builder, any common person, could learn the mechanical rules of “positive beauty,” he believed that the role of the academy was to help students form developed tastes and an appreciation for speculation, cultural advancement, even dissonance and the exotic.



Exemplifying functionalism, this Bauhaus-designed lamp rigorously distinguishes each functional element, while reducing each to a pure geometric form.



Mies Van der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion, 1929. Mies' steel frame "free plan" construction systems were deliberately more transparent, less hierarchical, and presumably more democratic with their spatially overlapping multiple centers, than axial, symmetrical, centralized, classical plans.



Le Corbusier's Voisin Plan of 1922 proposed bulldozing most of central Paris and replacing the small buildings and streets with enormous towers or superblock-sized parks.

Early archeological investigations of ancient classical temples happening at this time lent further support to “the moderns” position. Their measurements revealed that classical builders did not in fact apply the rules of the orders nearly as precisely as “the ancients” would have taught. In addition, these discoveries of evolving variety were made through a scientific process of empirical observation. This is the beginning of the Enlightenment and the very modern idea that knowledge is gained not through divine revelation but through progressive human investigation. “The moderns” increasingly linked the idea of cultural progress with the idea that systems of order and systems of beauty can also progress, change, evolve. In their eyes, the role of the academy is not only to teach received knowledge, but is also to ever question, ever pursue new knowledge.

From this perspective, it is not such a leap after all from the early *Ecole de Beaux Arts* to the late nineteenth century’s quintessential modern ideas of the *zeitgeist* and the *avant-garde*. Hegel argued that art serves culture by representing the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, and that within art an *avant-garde* takes on the role of leading society toward the ever more progressive unfolding of the *zeitgeist*. The *avant-garde* does not simply reflect its culture, it helps it to anticipate and evolve a more progressive society. As Winston Churchill said, we shape our buildings and then they shape us. To the idealistic modernists, architects have an ethical responsibility to build an ever more modern, more progressive world.

The modernist model of education that emerged in the early twentieth century was committed to these ideals, and deliberately broke with the composition-based, elite-oriented programs of the *Beaux Arts* model then in place. Instead, the *Bauhaus* and its progeny emphasized a doctrine of functionalism, health, and the classless society. An abstract formal language was privileged both as a signifier of functional efficiency and legibility, and for its purity and lack of cultural association with prior styles and classes. Post-war projects like Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’Habitation* were presented as a healthier and more equitable form of housing than the traditional tenements and squalid streets of the old city. Instead, his “towers in the park” were designed to elevate people off the street, and turn the streets into parkland and healthy open space, while giving people access to views, fresh air, sunlight, and roof terraces.

The “towers in the park” model of mass housing was not only proposed for new urban districts, it was also proposed as the principal model for urban renewal of older urban neighborhoods, starting with Le Corbusier’s (thankfully) unrealized 1922 *Voisin Plan* and later realized throughout American cities in the fifties and sixties. Although this model often degenerated into “towers in the parking lots” and is now irrevocably linked with many of the worst American public housing projects, it



This photograph of Gordon Bunshaft (arms raised) with his team of designers at SOM presents the image of another modern model that significantly influenced school curricula – the corporate architect.



In 1968, in protest of the school's technocratic and socially elitist orientation, the students at the Ecole de Beaux Arts paraded the Assistant Director of the school through the streets in a phone booth.

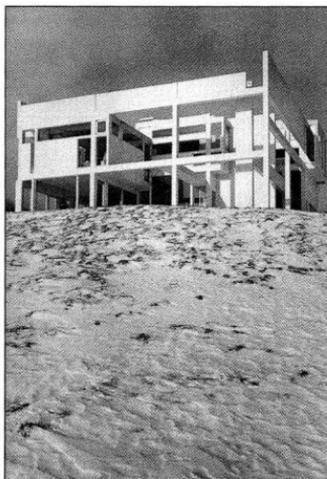
is important to recognize that at the time the designs were expected to build a new, rational, healthy, classless society out of what was perceived at the time as the filthy slums of a very decadent society.

This heroic task bred the model of the heroic modern architect, exemplified by the fictional Howard Roark in Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (and often thought to have been based on Frank Lloyd Wright). Instead of serving the commercial needs and bourgeois desires of clients, the heroic modern architect serves a larger social mission, and is uncompromising in his superiority as he battles to lead the uncomprehending heathens toward his ideals. And while Roark's arrogance is certainly no longer promoted to students as a model (in fact, today's students tend to find it laughable), the current educational system still prepares students for the role of the lone individualist. Design and creativity tend to be held in more esteem than the learning of history, technology, or professional practice. Studios still emphasize individual rather than team work. Students present their projects to a jury of both sympathetic and skeptical professors and are rehearsed in how to verbalize their intentions and defend their ideas and ideals. This form of architectural education presumes that, à la Howard Roark, the students will need to be prepared to lead, educate, and convince their, presumably, recalcitrant clients.

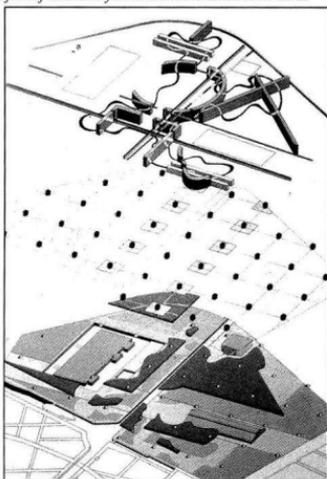
By mid-century both the schools and practitioners become increasingly professionalized and another role model emerges: the corporate architect working for the big corporate firm designing buildings for the big corporations. While a few designers, like Gordon Bunschaft at SOM, take the lead, the rest of his team are professionals with specialized duties who are expected to suppress their own egos and social ideals in favor of contributing to the technical performance of the building. At the same time, the National Architectural Accreditation Board defines specific criteria schools have to meet in order for their degrees to be professionally accredited. In response, architecture curricula in the fifties and sixties become increasingly technocratic.

By the late sixties students increasingly protested against being trained as acritical technocrats producing country clubs and corporate headquarters. Their demands for a more socially relevant curriculum reflected larger societal questions regarding the benefits of modernization. Instead of leading toward a more progressive condition, technology was increasingly being recognized as contributing to threats of war, pollution, and social alienation.

The watershed moment when modern architecture's ideals were most vividly repudiated came in 1972 with the demolition of the 1955, award-winning, Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex in St. Louis, designed by Minoru Yamasaki. Despite all of



Michael Graves' and Peter Eisenman's work consistently reflects a postmodern search for meaning. Although they posit fundamentally different meanings, Graves' work uses mural, earthy colors, and anthropomorphic references to celebrate human inhabitation of the landscape, while Eisenman's work deliberately represents constructs that frustrate human occupation, so as to reveal a condition of fundamental alienation from the world, both use architectural design as a form of commentary on the human condition in the world.



Reflecting post-structuralist theory, Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette and Rem Koolhaas' Euralille reject notions of the planned city and planned society as tyrannical and propose randomness and disorder as liberating conditions.

the best intentions to use design to improve the lives of the urban poor, the building's modern design was in fact seen as the cause of misery and the tenants themselves asked for it to be dynamited. Symbolically, this event reflected a general loss of faith in modernism's ability to live up to its utopian promises and ushered in post-modernism's quest not for technical excellence or social ideals, but for meaning – especially in the schools.

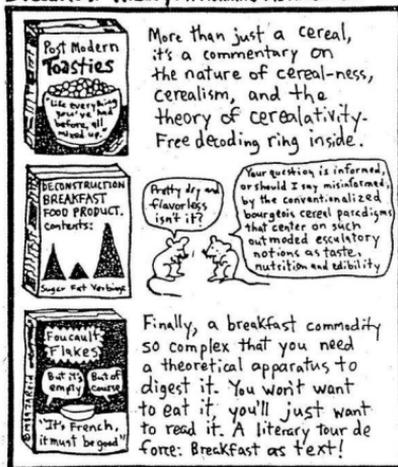
In the postmodern seventies, educator-architects like Michael Graves and Peter Eisenman influenced a generation to design buildings as commentaries on the human condition. Instead of discussing contemporary work in terms of the perfect curtain wall or thinnest possible neoprene gasket, schools began borrowing structuralist techniques from linguistics, and later, literary criticism and philosophy, to interpret the meaning of architectural designs. Architecture was again presented to students as a medium for expressing, not so much their ideals, but their personal critiques of cultural conditions.

Architectural theory courses proliferated in the eighties with a growing emphasis on critical thinking and a consequential elevation of the importance of the critical interpretation of the work over the designer's intentions. In the design studios this was accompanied by an increased emphasis on form as the unanticipated result of a serial process rather than as a deliberate, authored, refinement of a learned body of knowledge.

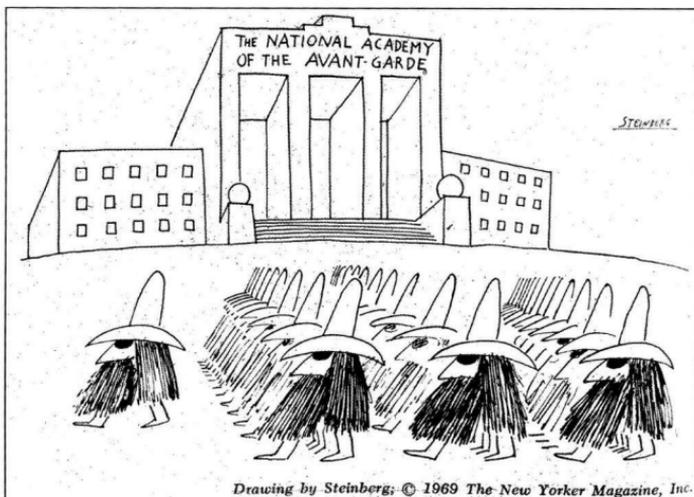
This attention to setting up a design process and allowing it to more or less play itself out was influenced by post-structuralist projects like Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette. Its superimposition of three unrelated formal systems deliberately produced chance formal compositions intended on the one hand to promote chance social encounters and on the other to reveal the arbitrariness of human ordering systems in a world that Tschumi believes is fundamentally un-ordered. Using a modernist formal language – red suprematist assemblages of abstract forms – Tschumi's project has none of modern architecture's utopian ideals about a planned society. On the contrary, it deconstructs the modernist tropes of reason and order as confining and arbitrary, and posits randomness and individual choice as more liberating conditions.

At an urban scale, Rem Koolhaas' late-eighties Euralille project similarly rejects traditional ordering systems as too controlling and limiting of acceptable social behavior. He argues that what makes for fundamentally urban and metropolitan conditions is not a system of planned streets, squares, and blocks, but rather the chance encounters and unplanned events of different kinds of activities and people coming

Breakfast Theory: A MORNING METHODOLOGY



Breakfast theory cartoon
— Architectural theory
was increasingly influ-
ential throughout the
seventies and eighties.



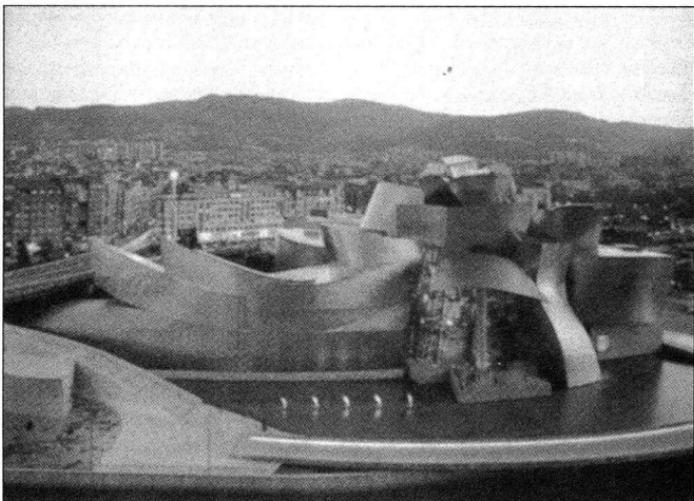
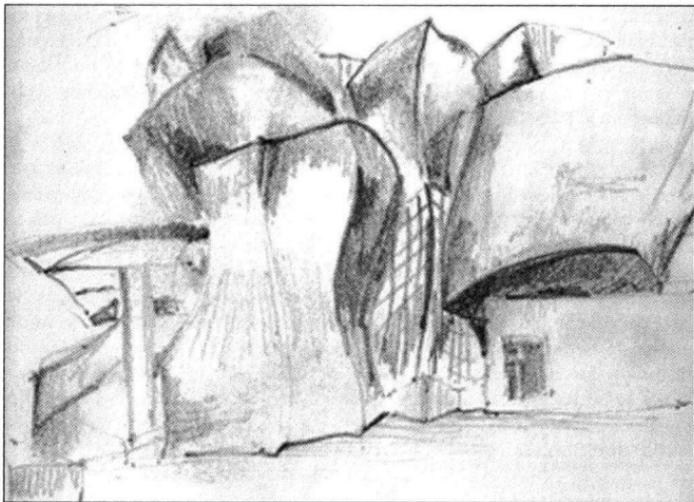
Saul Steinberg cartoon, The National Academy Of The Avant-Garde. There is more diversity in the schools today than in this Steinberg cartoon from 1969, although the championing of a very particular kind of individualism persists.

together. Euralille collides and juxtaposes different uses in ways that try to play up the collisions, celebrate speed as a form of individual freedom and avoid the making of traditionally ordered public spaces. His more recent championing of shopping as a freeing and public activity continues to challenge modern precepts while establishing him as a leading neo-avant-gardist.

Gradually, the interest in critical theory and post-structuralism is waning and there is some renewed interest in the schools in reforming conditions rather than simply commenting on them. This is particularly true of the growing interest in sustainability and environmental issues, and also applies to the considerable attention to designing for “multiple publics” (as opposed to the majority-dominant term, “the public”). However, the neo-avant-garde posture remains dominant, in large part due to the standard liberal arts effort to help students develop a critical stance. In architecture, this results in a continued emphasis on teaching students to critique contemporary conditions and critique conventional norms. We’re really not so far removed from Saul Steinberg’s 1969 cartoon mocking the institutionalization of the avant-garde where being a critical non-conforming individualist is utterly conventional.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on critiquing conventions often leads to unquestioned assumptions that if designs look traditional, they must be socially retrograde, and conversely, that if they look new and inventive (regardless of whether they simply reinforce the dominance of cultural elites), they must be socially progressive. Similarly, because anything from the past can be considered socially imperfect (and therefore “tainted”), the unknown and untried is often deemed baggage-free and preferable. As a consequence, the modernist model of education continues to emphasize invention – and in the worst cases, merely novelty – over critically teaching and learning conventions and traditions.

The celebrity afforded Frank Gehry for his inventive and highly sculptural buildings only further reinforces the appeal to students of chasing the new and developing an innovative signature style. Students (and faculty) in this mode often avoid urban design studios where the complexities of dealing with social, environmental, transportation, and economic issues distract too much from “pure” design. Unfortunately, this can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy that urban design is not creative and that the “best” designers are only interested in designing iconic monuments. In addition to the fact that few of those “best” designers will indeed succeed at being given iconic monumental commissions, an education devoted solely to formal manipulation leaves them ill-prepared to effectively work on other societal challenges.



Frank Gehry's highly personal and expressionistic work provides a problematic role model for students, but cautionary lessons about the inspiring popularity of the new.

However, despite the general problems with the modernist model of architectural education and specifically with Gehry as a role model for students, the extreme popularity of his work is suggestive of the model's virtues, or those babies that we shouldn't throw out with the bathwater. To begin with, perhaps because Gehry's work does not have an explicit mission of reform, it is able to send a very general and popular message that change is possible, progress is possible, and imagination linked to new technologies can be inspiring. Clearly, there is a strong cultural desire for work like his that challenges us to aspire to go beyond the familiar, to make a better world than we have yet known. While an education that focuses entirely on the new will leave its graduates ignorant, an education that focuses entirely on the lessons from the past risks reducing aspirations.

The mass popularity of Gehry's work also speaks to another virtue of the modernist model – the ability of the new to (more easily) belong to everyone. Generic building types also tend to be inclusive rather than exclusive, while the architectures of the past are inevitably associated with the social hierarchies that produced them.

In conclusion, the arguments about "positive" and "arbitrary" beauty remain relevant to the tensions today between those teaching according to the modernist model of architectural education and those teaching according to more traditional models. Today's "moderns" continue to accuse today's "ancients" of denying that any future improvement is possible, that somehow nature has bestowed all of her gifts and progress is no longer possible. Today's "ancients" continue to critique the work of the "moderns" as barbaric, capricious, and without foundation. We would perhaps be wise to recall Perrault's efforts to promote an education which balanced instruction in both and recognizes that in the world today, faith in positive truths of any kind will always be deemed arbitrary by some.

Windsor – Atlanta
April 2002 – February 2003

Discussion following Presentation on A Modernist Education

GARY HACK

As Victor Deupi said, the classical kind of gives you key exercises. What would you say the query for a classic exercise for a person was?

ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES

As I tried to illustrate, I think there's a big difference between the education and its exercises in the early, middle, and late twentieth century. The last fifteen years have produced some very strange exercises. There was a visiting critic at the University of Virginia who had his students go to the airport, get a meal for one of the flights, put it in the freezer and then slice it in sections both ways and use the slices as a basis for starting their design project. This is an extreme example of a rather common strategy instructors use to open their students to "thinking outside the box." (literally!) exploring form and discovering initiating gestures without preconceptions. Similarly, there are people programming relatively random data into computer algorithms to generate unpreconceived forms. Much of what is produced is more novel than good, however the intent of these exercises is to expand students' thinking about what architectural form could be, and stretch their abilities not just to imagine the new, but to make the unfamiliar work as conceivable buildings.

PHILIP BESS

Let me say first of all that I have no criticisms to make of your presentation, but let me ask you this question. You talked about the break between Modernism and the tradition of architectural education. But Colin Rowe has probably given the best articulation of how Modernism was a kind of faith. You talked about the break between Modernist faith and the Postmodernist condition of antifaith, of how we got from the one to the other. What do you think some of the reasons and applications are?

ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES

Jean François Lyotard defines Postmodernism in general, not just in architecture, as the loss of faith in the metanarratives of Modernism. The two metanarratives in particular that he sees the Postmodernists breaking away from are the Enlightenment ideas that the world is on a course of inevitable progress and that knowledge is liberating and the key to progress. Instead, Lyotard cites Postmodern disillusionment resulting from the

unintended consequences of technology, modernization, and digital information overload. I think the fear of unintended consequences and Modernism's unfulfilled promises has much to do with the Postmodern shift away from the agenda of reform towards an agenda of critique and commentary. As a form of consciousness raising, such critique and commentary is still assumed by some Postmodernists to be able to lead to notions of reform.

PHILIP BESS

What becomes of the notion of progress?

ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES

It becomes unspoken. Leading intellectuals of the new avant-gardism do not talk about progress. They are Postmodernists in this respect and have a wary cynicism about Enlightenment agendas and the degree to which architecture is capable of contributing to real cultural progress. Yet, I think it's still imbedded in how the architecture journals present the work.

RAUL GARCIA

The end effect is actually carrying that critical notion to its ultimate. So the whole system sort of devours itself.

ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES

There's a lot of talk about a backlash against theory now. The ambitious graduate student who, ten or fifteen years ago, wanted to get the edge on his classmates would have elected to take every theory course he possibly could. Now, they're taking every computer class they can. There has been a marked shift, some of which is really quite promising. The Postmodern, Tafuri-laden message of theory ten, fifteen years ago, was that the architect is more or less powerless to change the world or even control the critical interpretation of their work and the only way to regain control is to learn more and more about theory. The computer offers an entirely new set of tools to students, reempowers them to be able to actually do things, and as a consequence many of them are far less interested in theoretical, intellectual speculation. I worry about that loss, but at the same time appreciate how this generation is becoming more interested in doing more than just critiquing the world. They are increasingly open to more active agendas, especially in relation to sustainability. The fascination with new forms, new ideas, new theories, will always be celebrated by the media, but I think the media and the schools are actually quite separate.

RAUL GARCIA

Architecture is becoming more and more practice oriented. So essentially what we have left is what we actually do.