

ONLY BEAUTY CAN SAVE US

By Branko Mitrović / Professor NTNU (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway)



Photo by Magnus Holm

Architects cannot not engage with aesthetics. Usually, when they start to believe that they have managed to avoid aesthetic problems, this is a sure sign that some new horrific act of aesthetic pollution is going to hit our environment. Over decades such fantasies about the irrelevance of aesthetic concerns have massively damaged the reputation of architecture as a profession, undermined the faith in its purpose and by this time seriously threatened its existence. There should be no doubts about the contribution of the current forms of architectural education to such a state of affairs - a situation in which students enter architecture schools to become architects and end up by becoming professionals called “architects”. Addicted to aesthetic relativism as a palliative against awareness of its failures, the profession experiences *Arkitekturopprøret* as an unpleasant wake-up call and often reacts with anger to the protests of the public. It should, however, listen to the protests if it wants to survive.

Relativism

To start with, aesthetic issues do matter: the emphatic persistence with which the public condemns, on aesthetic grounds, much of contemporary architectural production has significantly diminished the credibility of the claims that aesthetic qualities are subjective, arbitrary or relative. There is something not merely desperate, but profoundly awkward about an architect who responds to the widespread criticism of the ugliness of the building he or she designed by saying that beauty is relative. The point is not even that such justifications ring hollow in the context of the massive public agreement about the aesthetic implications of Modernism that the *Arkitekturopprøret* has brought to the forefront. The point is much more that such a relativist architect sounds like a dentist who explains to the patient that toothache is merely a culturally constructed subjective feeling, not worth the attention of a dentist. Since a tooth that hurts cannot be healthy, and if the dentist cannot eliminate the pain, why

should one pay the dentist? Or in the case of the architect: if aesthetics is relative and not something the architect can systematically address, then why should the architect expect to be paid as an architect? Clearly, people with architecture degrees often do a lot of useful work as project managers, they organise building documentation and obtain building permits. But all this can be done by other professions as well. Once aesthetic qualities of architectural works are dismissed as irrelevant or arbitrary, it is not clear what architects can do that other professions cannot do equally well or even more competently, in a situation when planning is decided by developers and architects lack the competences, they once had to deal with engineering issues. So, if beauty is relative or irrelevant, if architects cannot be expected to contribute systematically to the aesthetic qualities of the built environment, then is there something that architects do that other professions cannot? Can they earn their living *as architects* in that case? Or, why would society need architects, architecture schools and architecturally educated individuals, if all they do can be done, often better, by other professions?

The tendency of many architects to endorse aesthetic relativism or dismiss aesthetic concerns altogether is a particularly curious aspect of the current state of the profession. The proliferation of such claims in the moment of a profound crisis of the profession almost borders on professionally suicidal behaviour. On the one hand, few architects actually do architecture at their jobs: typically, they work as project managers, take care of the administrative side of projects and so on. Few of them, and rarely, get to design. More often than not, the work they do could be done by other, less well-trained, individuals. All this is a sad outcome of their decision to become architects, and their expectation that the education they went through would lead them to creative and reasonably well-paid jobs. Once they are employed, their work is rarely creative, while the salaries they receive are below those of other professions whose training takes similar time. Many, maybe most practicing “architects” I know live lives of quiet desperation. On the other hand, reactions of the public to what they design when they get to design are often negative and sometimes openly hostile. Remarkably, it is often the work that receives most recognition by the profession (e.g. win competitions) that also attracts most hostility from the public. There is a massive gap between the kinds of designs that the profession values and that the public approves of. It is hard to think of an era when architects as a profession have been less appreciated—and especially when it comes to their ability to produce aesthetically satisfactory architectural designs. And if architects cannot design anything nice, while other things they do can be done by other professions, it is not clear who needs them at all.

Can the profession survive?

This threat that professionals called “architects” could be easily replaced is not to be dismissed easily. Once upon a time, architectural offices were largely populated by draftsmen—technical staff that had a year or two of training and prepared technical drawings, resolved technical, legal and administrative issues of the projects that architects designed. It is unkind to say, but not untrue, that large numbers of practicing “architects” with five-years master’s degrees in architecture could be replaced by old-fashioned draftsmen with one-or-two-years drafting certificates without any clear loss for the functioning of the offices where they work. The elephant in the room, however, is not so many people that do jobs for which they are overqualified. The actual problem is that it is not clear that they are overqualified at all, since it is not clear how much architectural education graduates of five-year master’s degrees in architecture receive. The education students receive certainly depends on the individual architecture school—but there are general trends, and to understand them one needs to look at the way the current state of affairs has come about.

The origins of our predicament go back to the global endorsement of Modernism in the years after World War Two. This was the time when commercial interests forced architecture offices to abandon formal-aesthetic concerns in order to survive. In the situation when offices were overflowed with commissions there was not enough drafting force to design ornamented facades, nor financial resources to pay for drafting their details. We all know what post-1945 bare facades look like. By the 1970s their domination and the absence of visual and formal aesthetic concerns in post-World War Two-architecture produced mass dissatisfaction, openly articulated in books by Peter Blake, Brent Broolin and Tom Wolfe. The problem was also recognised by the profession, including the leading figures of the Modernist movement. Gropius thus admitted that his generation was guilty of “producing horrors of repetitious housing developments”. Mies van der Rohe admitted the problem but blamed it on the public: “The sociologists tell us we have to think about the human beings who are living in that building. That is a sociological problem, not an architectural one.” The 1972 demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe apartment complex in St Louis is usually taken as the moment when general faith in Modernism ended. But it was hard to say what else to do. Architecture schools had abandoned teaching formal-aesthetic approaches to design that characterised pre-World War Two architecture a long time ago. Postmodernists’ attempts to recover these approaches originally ended up as failures because they subscribed to the Modernist misconception that Classical design merely consists in pasting ornaments on the façade. It would take another fifteen years to recover the lost knowledge of Classical design. The first proper Classical designs started

appearing only in the late 1980s. The expedient that the profession found in the 1970s was to continue with Modernist designs while providing theoretical justifications that would argue the irrelevance of visual and formal aesthetic qualities. Christian Norberg-Schulz's introduction of "New Look"-psychology-based claim that all perception depends on ideas associated with the object of perception—that buildings cannot be perceived independently of their "meanings"—was the first step in that direction. Other similar strategies followed, and for the past fifty years we have seen a series of such architectural "theories": that what matters is the spirit of the place, the mystical connection of architecture with its location, that architecture is actually a text, that it should express the pleasures of unease or the presence of absence, that what matters is building's tactile qualities, the way the building smells or even how it tastes. What is common to all these theorisations is the effort to reject and deny the relevance of visual, formal-aesthetic qualities and thus defend the commercial interests of a profession that has lost the capacity to design buildings that people like.

The kind of problems that the architectural profession faces when the general public expects visual-formal qualities in its designs, architecture schools face when they have to deal with students who are recruited from that same public. Students typically come to architecture schools with the expectation of being taught to design architecture with visual-formal aesthetic qualities. It was during the 1990s, the heyday of Deconstruction, that architecture schools discovered that by bamboozling students, giving them incomprehensible texts to read, by talking profoundly sounding nonsense, and by encouraging irrational behavior in students, one can cure them from visual-formal aesthetic expectations. It was in those days that the practice of requiring students to make a cake or perform a dance for a studio grade started. I remember how I was invited as a guest critic for a studio project in which the student presented six pages of meaningless text, with the explanation that they were taught that everything is a text. In those days it was common to assign studio project briefs that consisted of one word, such as "threshold" or "interstices". I know of a school where a student covered her dining table with a large sheet of paper at the beginning of the semester, ate on that paper for the whole semester and then at the end of the semester drew a line between the areas that had food marks and that did not. This was her response to the studio brief "boundary"—and she won the school's prize for the best student design of the year. In another school the students were required to watch in studio German 1920s movies for a whole week and then told to express the movie contents by pouring concrete into moulds. They all dully came with the same-looking concrete blocks. The crit in which they were then desperately trying to relate these blocks to the contents of

the movies they saw was one of the most bizarre ones I've witnessed in my 30-year long career as an architecture educator. Once it was discovered how efficiently one can suppress students' aesthetic expectations and critical thinking by bamboozling them, new techniques were further developed even after the demise of Deconstruction in the end of the 1990s. I am unaware, for instance, that giving the instruction to students to go to the building site, smell the air and draw the smell came into use before the 2007 edition of Steven Hall's, Alberto Pérez-Gómez's and Juhani Pallasmaa's "*Questions of Perception*". By emphasizing such contents in the early years of their curricula architecture schools can efficiently suppress their students' visual-formal aesthetic expectations, dull their capacities for critical thinking, strengthen their obedience to professional authorities as well as filter out many of those students whose strong aesthetic sense or analytic abilities would make them unsuitable for future professionals called "architects".

Beauty and survival

The problem is, however, that there are limits to how long one can keep cutting the branch of a tree that one is sitting on. The Internet and social media are making it increasingly difficult to hide the inability of the profession to fulfil its essential purpose and the failure of architectural academia to train future architects for the role society expects them to perform. The fact that the power of this online context is often overlooked only makes things worse. In recent polemics against *Arkitekturopprøret* many professionals have argued that architecture is so much more than what the building looks like. The point is well made, but it is not clear that these other things are not something that other professions can do equally well or better than architects. Nobody is going to deny that sustainability is important—but, certainly, engineers are much more competent to put solar panels on a building than architects. Let alone the attempts to argue from more "theoretical" positions. An architect who seeks to justify the aesthetic failure of a design by saying that the design expresses profound meanings has already overstepped the boundaries of public credibility. Such architects resemble a chef who explains to restaurant guests that yes, the meal they were served was awful and yes, it is understandable that they had to vomit after trying it, but nevertheless, the meal was a successful representation of blue sky. And I dare not imagine the reaction of the public to a more "phenomenological" explanation such as "yes, the building I've designed is ugly as sin, but you should really try the taste of the plaster on the façade, which is exquisite". Who needs such architects?

Something similar applies to architectural education as well. Here, the problem is the impression that society can do very well without five-year

architecture degrees and that two-to-three-year drafting certificates could be a cheaper and better option. In an article published in Arkitektur.no on 6 June 2024 the Rector of The Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO) has presented a Master theses in which the candidate collected samples of smells from Hong Kong forests to answer the question “How are landscapes perceived from the point of view of a wild boar?” It is easy to point out that such a study is a distinctly non-architectural project, while the student has spent massive time and public resources working on such a thesis. I am not stating this example to criticise AHO, I have not studied the thesis, and I am aware that similar these are not uncommon in other schools. I only want to contemplate possible reactions of the public to the way the thesis has been presented in the article. The fact that such a thesis has been accepted at AHO suggests that the last semester of the ten-semester Master of Architecture programme is redundant, and that society could save massive funds by reducing architectural education to nine semesters. This applies to all architecture schools: since this example shows that a well-reputed school such as AHO can provide sufficient architectural education in nine semesters, others should be able to do it as well. Further cuts that prevent the waste of public funds can be proposed based on similar contents taught in various semesters in various architecture schools. Tutors’ bizarre and pseudo-intellectual attempts to bamboozle students quickly spread on the Internet and they do not only undermine the credibility of architectural education, but also the need for it. Why should taxpayers’ money be wasted on semesters of “architectural” education in which students learn to draw smells or study wild boars?

Arkitekturopprøret’s criticisms, unpleasant for many in the “architectural” establishment are thus a call to save architecture as a profession and its educational institutions. I do not know whether this can be done; I confess I fear that things have gone too far. But I do know that people cannot do without beauty—and if professionals called “architects” cannot provide it for the public, real architects will arise from contexts outside “architecture schools” to create it.

About Branko Mitrović

Branko Mitrović received his PhDs in architecture and philosophy and has been a recipient of research fellowships from the Harvard University, Canadian Centre for Architecture, the Humboldt Foundation, National Gallery of Art (Washington DC) and the Clark Art Institute. He has taught in the USA, Italy, New Zealand, Germany, Serbia and for the past ten years he has worked as professor at NTNU, Trondheim. Professor Mitrović is the author (or co-author) of eleven books and has been a recipient of Humboldt Research Award and Ny Norsk Kulturpris.