The Architecture School Building Structuring Perception of the City

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Introduction

THE PRESENT conference theme proposes that schools of architecture are capable of provoking urban change.[1] Following this assumption, it becomes worthwhile to ask how much of this capability derives from architecture school buildings, and specifically, on these buildings' ability to structure visual perception of the city. That the question does not lead to a predictable response follows from the observation that schools of architecture in urban settings can be found in both purpose-designed buildings and renovated buildings originally designed for other purposes – with the University of Waterloo's building in Cambridge as an immediate example of the second type. Because of the conference's urban focus, it is also important in answering this question to look beyond the didactic interpretation of an architecture school building as a teaching tool (as is expected of architecture school buildings which provide exposed construction or systems available for students to inspect and study).

If an architecture school's ability to affect urban change is acknowledged to depend even in part on the school's ability as an institution to promote an understanding of the city (the object of change) in a manner which is ***visually informed***, it follows that the ability of school buildings to structure visual perception must be established. To ***structure visual perception*** is characteristic of architecture, in that architecture always mediates embodied visual perception of its site (i. e., the city). Lynda Nead, in discussing Michel De Certeau's analysis of visual perception of the city, distinguishes the totalizing view made possible by standing atop the World Trade Center from the labyrinthine view gained by a walk through the city at street level.[2] Architecture is understood by Nead as being capable of structuring a particular kind of visual perception, which in turn impacts the construction of knowledge and understanding of the city. Similarly, Peter Merriman[3] and Tim Edensor[4] recognize the ways in which freeways structure visual perception, memory, and understanding. Nead, Merriman, and Edensor thus support the idea that the structuring of visual perception (and hence of a specific understanding of the environment) derives from inhabiting architecture or infrastructure and ***looking through it*** rather than

looking at it. Tentatively, it follows from this that architecture could be considered as a medium, like photography, drawings or maps, all of which have the capability as media to structure perception of a city. However, to so consider architecture would be to ignore both its unique characteristic of inhabitability, and its receptivity to change in use. Specifically, while architecture's ability to structure perception of the city is certainly constitutive, this ability is – as uses of a building change over time – ever-shifting and unfixed. Nevertheless, architecture can be understood as a construct which ***mediates between people and the city***, that which is too vast and intricate to be comprehended as a whole, whether as an object or as a field. Architecture, when inhabited and seen through, causes the city to be visually understood in a particular and fragmentary way, making it specifically comprehensible and hence susceptible to action. And if, as Mario Gandelsonas[5] and Beatriz Colomina[6] independently suggest, architecture is bound together with practices of representation, it becomes necessary to understand how the mechanism of representation functions: specifically, to identify those aspects of architecture which ***when seen through*** enter the city into understanding in particular ways.

De Certeau's identification of the unique and totalizing moment atop the World Trade Center is enough to remind us that visibility of the city from within architecture is always (except for such totalizing moments) fragmentary. The city is left behind as one enters a work of architecture: how is it returned to, or visibly recovered, by degrees as one moves through the work? The question is not specific to architecture school buildings, because any work of architecture, however prosaically articulated, will structure visual perception and will consequently inform a specific understanding of the city. However, such structuring is critically relevant to an architecture school, because its successful functioning depends in part on its inhabitants' abilities to make sense of their urban surroundings as a precursor to proposing change. In other words, an architecture school building not only possesses a capability to structure visual perception and hence understanding, but the ***understanding so structured is expected to become operational.*** Recognizing this, Mario Gandelsonas has written that ***"reading of the city,"*** that is, the act of entering the city into knowledge, the responsibility which architecture bears as a subject, is ***"a first moment in an effort to change the city."***[7] How, then, do the specific uses which people are expected to make of a building affect the building's ability to structure perception of the city? And how much of a building's ability to relevantly structure perception depends on the deliberate purposes of its designer? To explore these questions, this paper considers three types of architecture school

buildings: first, the building built for another purpose and later remodeled to house an architecture school; second, the building built as an architecture school and later expanded through an addition; and finally, the building built as an architecture school and later made to serve a new purpose. In each case, the possibility of architecture to structure visual perception of the city is highlighted as means of making the city understandable and thus accessible to the possibility of change.

Pedagogical possibilities

The question of the school building serving as an explicit teaching tool is interesting though somewhat predictable. Obvious pedagogical possibilities of an architecture school building reflect a set of expected relationships between the institution's curricular needs and the physical form of the building. A prevailing assumption (one which takes several forms) is that students will learn about architecture by looking at the building. For example, a newly constructed building, purpose-designed to suit an architecture school, can safely be assumed to provide students with tangible evidence of the functioning of contemporary practice. A remodeled building can be assumed to provide students with evidence of processes of assembly, or of obvious contrasts between old and new construction techniques. Consider Steven Holl's statement in reference to his addition and remodeling at Pratt: *"I really had an a priori idea of ... letting students learn how it's put together just by looking at it."*[8] Contemporary practices almost guarantee that new architecture school buildings (whether purpose-built as a school of architecture, or remodeled into one) will employ sustainable technologies, and that these technologies will be exposed or made visible for potential instructional purposes.[9] While relevant pedagogical possibilities of a school building can certainly originate from diverse sources and interpretations (for example, material, metaphorical, allegorical, etc.), the question of ***structured visibility*** is critical to distinguishing the degree to which these possibilities are capable of becoming operational – opening the city to change. This view is supported by Adnan Morshed's recounting of Le Corbusier's perception of Buenos Aires made possible by the airplane. Here, the visual perception gained by an architect ***through a specific mode of transportation*** resulted in an opening of the city to a specific architectural proposal. Corbusier's proposal for the city, in Morshed's view, directly depended on the way Corbusier perceived that city.[10] How does this happen within the architecture of the architecture school building?

Repurposed buildings

The *repurposed building* is one which houses a school of architecture though originally designed to meet some other purpose. Such buildings may never achieve a full correspondence with an institution's desired functions, but as Peter Blake has acknowledged, their *"endless awkwardnesses"* are often precisely at the root of creativity and action.[11] A common situation in repurposed buildings is the *open architecture studio bounded by a regularly perforated wall.* This situation is found in schools located in renovated warehouses, factories, or mills (e. g., Waterloo, Syracuse, SCI-Arc, or North Dakota State), or generally in schools located in bearing-wall structures.[12] The city is perceived from such spaces first of all as through a perforated or striated screen, particularly if one's entry into the space occurs at a point somewhat distant from the perimeter. The screen generally embodies no deliberately designed attempt to focus visual attention on specific exterior features: it functions instead to separate a viewing subject from an observable exterior.[13] However, this separation occurs in a very particular way. To see the city through a screen is to see it through several distinct openings at once, not one of which is necessarily primary, and which have a cumulative effect on visibility, especially when seen in combination from a distance. It is to have a view of the city which, though organized in a staccato rhythm, is continuous above all else. To see the city this way is to understand the city as something *filterable into distinct but fundamentally alike views.* A city thus seen is one which is opened to the possibility to change as a field to be first internalized and then acted upon from a privileged vantage point – the studio itself. The perforated screen, which derives from bearing-wall construction practices, forwards and perpetuates a perception of a wall as a barrier between *place for seeing from* and *place seen.* This perception is emphasized by a regularly perforated wall, for an irregularly perforated wall would not only imply particular suitability of a given distinct opening to a certain function, view, or constructional oddity, but also (recalling Le Corbusier's perforated wall at Ronchamp) provide discrete, identifiable objects within the wall itself.

Additions to architecture schools

The University of Minnesota's Ralph Rapson Hall consists of an original 1954 building purpose-designed for the school of architecture by the Minneapolis firm of Thorshov & Cerny, and a 2002 addition designed by Steven Holl.[14] Reflecting the Corbusian notion of the "square spiral" plan,[15] the 1954 building is organized around a central

courtyard from which – as originally designed – direct horizontal views of the city were unavailable except for limited views through the front entrance. By means of clerestory windows under a high roof, one can see from within the court a continuous, horizontal strip of sky in all directions. Inhabiting this central court recalls (or perhaps re-anticipates) the original entry to the 1954 building, beneath a small, exterior replica of the courtyard roof placed on the west front of the building. Thus, while in the original building it was possible to perceive the city directly and horizontally upon entry (or exit), the building's main space denies such direct views. The central court of the 1954 building is surrounded on four sides by open studios with regularly perforated exterior walls, which by virtue of their exact 90-degree rotational symmetry in plan, fully deny the specificity of particular views. From no point within the 1954 building is it possible to look out and see any part of the building (i. e., views from within are always directed away from the building). In this way, the original building externalizes the city, situating it as a field perceivable from within a regular, almost crystalline lattice-building.

As a distinct counterpoint to the 1954 building, Holl's 2002 addition deliberately frames at almost every moment a host of idiosyncratic, eye-level, telescoped views. Instead of providing an evenly distributed view of the city as field, as in the original, Holl's addition produces a constant reframing of spaces, fields, and frames within frames: the building operates like an inhabitable telescope – perhaps ***kaleidoscope*** is better – producing shifting but always discrete views of itself and of the city. As a reflection on the original building, Holl's addition newly questions the role of viewing the city as central to the functioning of the architecture school. Where the 1954 building structures visual perception of the city from a central, contemplative point (the courtyard), or from the studios with their evenly distributed though static view, the 2002 building fundamentally subverts distinctions between object and field, and between center and periphery. These relationships are critically established through the act of addition, as either building on its own fails to establish the necessary dialectic – though arguably the 1954 building's (currently unused) entry pavilion, considered as a counterpoint to the central courtyard, accomplished this to a degree.[16] As Holl's work at Minnesota illustrates, the act of adding to an original architecture school building – whether or not the original building was purpose-designed for the school – carries the possibility of challenging the original designer's assumptions about architecture's structuring of visual perception. Addition situates a new work of architecture between the original building and the city; it constitutes something new to look through from within the original building.

An addition thus acutely forwards the possibility of architecture operating as a medium for visual perception. But, it will always do so in a manner which highlights the receptivity of architecture to a change in use. For these reasons, architecture school additions tend to blur strictly defined boundaries between school and city. The implication for a school's 'agency' to affect urban change is that the architecture school building, through addition, can insinuate itself within the city, triggering inquiry into the degree to which inhabiting the city is inseparable from inhabiting the building.[17]

Architecture schools abandoned

Successfully justifying abandonment of its own purpose-designed building in favor of new quarters likely requires a school of architecture to rely on pragmatic and readily defensible reasons such as the building's failure to spatially accommodate its program – perhaps as a consequence of expanded enrollment, or of a shift in the school's pedagogical focus. However, the situation of an abandoned, purpose-designed architecture school building should also raise the question of whether the building *failed to meaningfully structure visual perception of the city.*

If a school of architecture can make a city accessible to change, and if it does so in part because its building structures visual perception of the city, what can be said of a vacated architecture school building brought to serve a new use? How might a new institution situate itself within a building purpose-designed as a school of architecture? If the building *as a building* has the capability to impact construction of urban knowledge, to whom is that knowledge relevant? Does the vacated building continue to make the city accessible to change in the same way to new inhabitants as to old? Though the scarcity of abandoned, purpose-designed architecture school buildings (such as Waterloo's ESII Building, which was vacated by the architecture school in favor of the Cambridge building, or North Dakota State's on-campus Ehly Hall, which will soon be vacated by the architecture school in favor of a newly remodeled off-campus facility) precludes conclusive responses, it is certain that as more schools of architecture vacate their purpose-designed buildings, the question of abandonment will develop increasing relevance to urban-architectural pedagogy: specifically, *if architecture school buildings are agents of urban change, what are the consequences for a city if a school abandons its building?*

Conclusion

The risk of attempting speculation on a building's 'agency' to affect urban change unless and until those attributes of the building which make the city understandable in a particular way are identified is that doing so will invite characterization of the school building as an object, the conceptual functioning of which can be completely defined through externalities, such as identifying the building's ability *as an object* to attract people to a formerly neglected neighborhood. While such externalities may well be critical to a vital community, they do not in themselves adequately address the range of specific relationships which can exist between the program of the school and the physical characteristics of its building, and its urban site. Specifically, to ignore the ways in which an architecture school building operates to visually structure perception (and thus to inform a particular understanding of a city, in turn opening that city to the possibility of change), is to ignore an issue central to the successful functioning of any school – and by implication, to the vitality of the city.

Notes

1 From the online description of the conference theme: *"In this conference we seek to expose and discuss the ample evidence that architecture schools have become active and successful builders of communities. We will share the experiences of schools of architecture and the universities of which they are part as agents of urban transformation"* (emphasis added). Retrieved August 2007 from http://www.architecture.uwaterloo.ca/acsa_2007.

2 Lynda Nead. *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, p 7.

3 Peter Merriman. "Driving places: Marc Augé, Non-places, and the Geographies of England's M1 Motorway." *Theory, Culture & Society 21*, vol 4, 2004, p145-167.

4 Tim Edensor. "M6 - Junction 19-16: Defamiliarizing the Mundane Roadscape." *Space and Culture 6*, 2003, p151-168.

5 Mario Gandelsonas. *X-Urbanism*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, p59-71.

6 Beatriz Colomina. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1994.

7 Gandelsonas, *X-Urbanism*, p66.

8 Fred A. Bernstein. "Where New and Old Collide." *Metropolis*, February 2006.

9 Michael Burns, renovation architect for North Dakota State University (NDSU)'s downtown building in Fargo, has said of the building that it gives students *"an opportunity to see how systems can be integrated within an existing facility and how other techniques can be employed to increase the connection between the building's original history and [its] contemporary use."* Retrieved August 2007 from *AIA Architect This Week*, July 20, 2007, at http://www.aia.org/aiarchitect/thisweek07/0720/0720d_nd.cfm, August 2007.

10 Adnan Morshed. "The Cultural Politics of Aerial Vision: Le Corbusier in Brazil (1929)." *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, 2002, p201–210.

11 Peter Blake. *Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked*, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1977, p28, 22.

12 The renovated pavilion at Mississippi State's Giles Hall, which houses architecture studios, is in this sense a specific variant of the perforated-screen type of repurposed building: the building's narrow ends are perforated by windows enabling views of the surrounding campus.

13 *"One way to understand the interior is as a space that provides some primal protection from seeingness, as a screen that manipulates light."* Yeoryia Manolopoulou. "The interior of vision: Beckett's Film and experiments with Viewing Instrument 1 (VI1)." *The Journal of Architecture* 9, 2004, p315-330.

14 Holl was commissioned twice to design an addition to the Minnesota school; the initial proposal, which implied a larger extent of new work within the perimeter of the original 1954 building, was never built.

15 1992 conversation with John Rauma, lead designer of the 1954 building. The "square spiral" occurs in Le Corbusier's drawings and built work including art museums in Chandigarh, India, Ahmedabad, India, and in Tokyo.

16 Holl has acknowledged this dialectic, though without explicitly recognizing the original building's ability to structure externally-directed views of the city: *"While [the 1954] building is centralized and homogeneous, the [2003] addition offers peripheral views and morphological multiplicity. The existing is centripetal, with right angles framing four views onto the same court; the addition is centrifugal, with obtuse angles opening to exterior landscapes. In compliment to the horizontal existing building, the arms of the addition end in vertical elevations, bracketing 'shafts of space' and activating the campus."* Retrieved August 2007 from http://www.stevenholl.com/PT156_1C.htm.

17 A similar discussion could originate with Peter Eisenman's Aronoff Center at the University of Cincinnati.