The Oxford Conference

A re-evaluation of education in architecture

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The 2nd Oxford Conference

50 Years On - Resetting the Agenda for Architectural Education

Conference Chair

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Introduction

Good buildings matter. They are the family silver of a society and they are the tools with which we have always provided safe and civilized settlements throughout history. At best they offer dignity, quality of life and security. In a rapidly changing world of more extreme climates and the end of cheap fossil fuel energy, buildings will increasingly provide the means for communities to explore and reinforce more sustainable lifestyles.

At the time of the 1958 Conference one common dream was to design buildings that would be able to provide a very high level of amenities with sophisticated machines and energy that was 'too cheap to meter'. That dream is no longer relevant. In order to survive in comfort in the future it is the design of the buildings themselves that we have now to get right, not simply the mechanical life support systems that so many of them depend upon today. This alone is a huge opportunity for a new kind of architecture.

We all see the future differently. Everything before today used to be ordinary and predictable, but from now on things will never be the same again. We will all have to change the way we do things to adapt to rapidly evolving circumstances. How apt then that the 2nd Oxford Conference should occur now, at this time when we need to intelligently work together to devise strategies to keep our societies ahead of the challenges that the 21st century seems so intent on throwing at us.

The key word here is together. The 1958 Conference was organized by Sir Leslie Martin on behalf of the Education Committee of the RIBA and attended by 50 white men. The full text of the Report on the Conference can be seen in Appendix 1. The 2008 Conference is organized by Professor Susan Roaf and attended by over 500 people of both sexes and all creeds, colours and continents. It is organized by a range of groups, TIA, the European 'Teachers in Architecture' organization; SBSE, the American 'Society of Building Science Educators' and the long list of contributors listed in the acknowledgements page of this volume. However, in many ways the aspirations of both events are very similar.

In 1958 the organizing committee had several objectives:

1) The Conference should draw together as much relevant factual information as possible

2) The discussion should bring out as much informed opinion as possible from people interested in widely different aspects of Architectural Education
3) The discussion should be frank
4) If possible, some line of action should emerge

In 2008 these seem sensible premises on which to go forward. Whereas the 1958 Conference was exclusive with a remit stating:
'In order to concentrate the discussion which was bound to be extensive it was felt that invitations to the Conference would have to be limited…….. a limited number of people could perhaps spend longer periods together'. Voices to be heard were selected from a known pool of opinions and 'Invitations were… sent to people inside and outside the profession who were known to have views to express ….. an effective cross-section of opinion and interest.' They decided that the range of subjects could certainly not be covered in any single session and it was held over a weekend at Magdalen College, Oxford, on April 11th to 13th 1958. It was inevitably an exclusive event representing the opinions of the 50 invited, who came largely from within the bounds of the architectural profession. The 2008 Conference was designed to be an inclusive event to which all were welcomed and are expected to contribute.

The 1958 Conference was divided into three main sessions. These covered broadly:

1. The needs of the profession and the community and the desirable standards
2. The means of education, the routes of entry into the profession and the standards that are being and could be achieved
3. Developments of advanced training and research.

The 2008 Conference concentrated on 11 subject areas in Forums, each organized by a single Forum Leader covering:

1. Buildings and the Environment
2. Sustaining Studio Education in a Climate of Change
3. Human Habitat and Social Responsibility
4. Refurbishment and Evidence Based Education
5. Research into Teaching Courses
6. Urban Design and Sustainable Cities
7. Schools and Professional Views
8. Materials and Renewable Energy
9. Virtual Building and Generative Design
10. Design Research
11. Courses and Curricula

In fact the number of the oral papers was limited to the number of speaking slots available in the programme, and the oral papers chosen by the Forum leaders. However the extensive programme of poster sessions allowed the majority of submitted papers to be displayed and discussed during the Conference and each Forum provided the opportunity for discussion after the papers and

during the workshop events with the intention that each Forum brought to the final session recommendations for the New Agenda for Architectural Education.

It is inevitable that strong themes emerged from the event. In 1958 many of the same themes were also debated:

'If architecture is to take its proper place in the University and if the knowledge which it entails is to be taught at the highest standard, it will be necessary to establish a bridge between faculties: between the Arts and the Sciences, the Engineering Sciences, Sociology and Economics. Furthermore, the Universities will require something more than a study of techniques and parcels of this or that form of knowledge.'

The issue of the extent to which architectural students today should be expected to know the science of how buildings work as well as how to make them attractive is still a crucial issue for debate as well as the need to keep the theoretical basis of architectural education rooted in reality. "Theory," as one speaker in 1958 said, "is the body of principles that explains and inter-relates all the *facts* of a subject." Research, the discussion continued, is the tool by which theory is advanced. Without it, teaching can have no direction and thought no cutting edge. Experimental development in schools of advanced technology would give these institutions the opportunity of advancing those aspects of architectural education which are proper to their framework and of adding to the variety of skills that are required of the architect. Those basic skills and the extent to which they are being taught in schools today are still up for debate.

The 1958 Conference effectively sidelined alternative methods of delivering architectural education and did away, for instance, with 'unrecognised' facility schools for one. 'The Facility School', they wrote, 'can develop in any institution at which a reasonable number of candidates present themselves for part-time and evening training.' But the need to get RIBA approval amongst other things ensured that the only organisations that were licensed to provide architectural education were in the Universities although some distances learning is still managed by the RIBA itself. How sustainable are full five year courses in today's volatile economy? Such issues need re-visiting.

The 2008 Oxford Conference provided an inclusive forum for the debate and development of new approaches to architectural education and resulted ultimately in the New Agenda document that will influence future directions for the profession itself. One real difference in 1958 is evident in one line of the original report,

'This opportunity for the interchange of ideas between men of different interests and experience is of the greatest importance to both students and staff.' In many Schools of Architecture today women are in the majority on many courses and this may in turn influence the way we think about building design.

The following essays, published here in alphabetical order in the Forum section in which they were presented in Oxford, come from a wide range of contributors and are meant to provide thoughtful re-evaluations of where

architectural education has failed and succeeded over the last five decades and provide many interesting ideas on how we can build on the best practices demonstrated to move forward with an evolving architecture that faces head-on the challenges of the 21st century and uses the gifts of human ingenuity to build a safer and better world, with better buildings, to keep us all safe in the uncertain decades ahead while promoting quality, comfort and the dignity of people around the world.

S.Roaf,
Conference Chair
Oxford, 2008

The Oxford Conference - some thoughts from the past

Special introduction by Sir Andrew Derbyshire

When I was a student at the AA over half a century ago a group of us wrote, designed and published a magazine called PLAN on behalf of the Architectural Students' Association. PLAN No 6 of 1949 looked at the relationship between building, architecture and education and included fourteen points for the reform of architectural education. These included proposals for students to work "as labourers on building sites" and "in factories…studying machine processes and techniques on the spot" plus "workshops in the school for the experimental study of materials and techniques." This echoed our enthusiasm for real architectural practices based in the school like the one led by Douglas Jones at Birmingham. We also called for "Joint programmes with students of other faculties such as medicine, economics, sociology, engineering and the natural sciences" and "collaboration with students of painting, sculpture and the other arts from the beginning of design programmes." We said that design programmes should have "sites and clients to which the student had access." This was of course a reaction to the artificiality of the Beaux Arts tradition embodied in the standing joke of a programme for "A monastery on a rocky promontory". A related demand was for "Technical courses based on and continually referring to fundamental human needs." We cheekily demanded "Group working on design subjects, joint working between students of different years in the five-year course, substitution of formal lectures by free discussion where possible and control of the school curriculum by joint student-staff committees" – the last of which was operating, perhaps uniquely, at the AA at that time and reflected the fact that the Association had initially been started by disaffected articled pupils who paid their premiums but were treated as office boys. We realised that we were a better off at the AA in terms of the content and didactics of the course than were our fellow students at the general run of architectural schools, and felt that we were speaking on their behalf against the rigid curricula of the Beaux Arts tradition which canonised the precepts of classical architecture and treated the modern movement with scorn.

We were also concerned about the isolation of the architectural student from the real world of human needs and the practical skills of building and engineering.

Many of us who had been involved in the recent war understood that management skills were essential to getting anything difficult done and should also be an essential part of the curriculum. My own experience as a scientist working for the navy had also left me devoted to the principle of feedback and the free exchange of experience and I couldn't wait, having at last achieved my boyhood ambition to be an architect, to introduce the discipline of scientific method to the building industry.

I acknowledge in retrospect that our rather priggish certainty was derived partly from our shared belief in the anarchistic ideals of the self-regulating society – our heroes were people like Patrick Geddes, Martin Buber and Herbert Read – but mainly from the impatience we felt that the world was facing the horror of the third, and potentially last, atomic world war but seemed unable to do anything about it – paralysed like a rabbit by the blinding light of a brand new problem of indescribable immensity. So when I was pressed to attend the Oxford Conference of 1958 I had mixed feelings. I was deeply committed to the Sheffield City Architects' office by then and the aim to restrict architectural education to the universities looked to me like fiddling while Rome burnt. However I admitted that life had to go on and while the architectural profession as a collective, never mind its individual members, was helpless in the face of a potential cosmic disaster the least it could do was to put its own house in order.

For one thing it would obviously be good to improve and widen the intellectual basis of architecture and I thought that the university milieu would be able to do this and at the same time provide a fertile ground for the development of multi-disciplinary studies. On the other hand – there is always a "but" – I was worried that architectural students would lose touch with the "horny handed sons of toil" at the vocationally oriented polytechnics and colleges of building and become even more isolated from the practicalities of construction.

However, the organisers of the 1958 Conference had their way and eventually nearly all architectural schools have been embedded in universities. Has this been a good or a bad thing? Do any of our aims of the 1950s seem relevant to the students and teachers of today; what indeed has become of them during the intervening years and what new ones do we need to embrace to face the future with confidence? I very much hope that your conference will be able to find some answers.

Meanwhile here's my twopenn'th, for what they're worth. First I have to deplore the failure to establish architectural practices within the schools. George Grenfell Baines had a go at Sheffield some years ago but was defeated, as I understand it, by small-minded local practitioners who complained that he was stealing their livelihoods. More important, however, is the virtual absence of multi-skilled education without which effective multi-disciplinary practice is impossible. Over ten years ago I spent some time under the auspices of the Construction Industry Council, and with the help of a government grant, looking at the obstacles and recommending action to overcome them. The result was a report called Crossing Boundaries, published in April 1993, on the state of commonality in education and training for the construction professions. It ended up with over thirty recommendations for action divided between the three bodies most appropriate to take the lead, namely the professional institutions, the HEIs and the Construction Industry Council. It

was warmly welcomed by all concerned, and as far as I know absolutely nothing has happened. Why? I think the reason is to be found in the vested interests of the professional institutions. They are obliged, for economic reasons as much as any, to draw a tight boundary around their membership and resolutely defend any dilution of their closed shop by migrants from other professions. This means that, as far as education is concerned, each professional qualification is regarded as sacrosanct by the institution concerned and this is locked in place by the corresponding departmental structure of the universities, which inhibits any attempt to cross boundaries. In this respect the work of the 1958 Conference has been a disaster. Why is this important? In the 1950s we were facing the catastrophe of the third world war, but it was only a possibility. On the contrary the catastrophe the world faces today is a certainty and unless we can, in the short time available, modify the consequences of climate change the results don't bear thinking about.

Improving the sustainability of the built environment is an essential part of this modification and the construction industry must equip itself to play a leading part. This will demand an unprecedented degree of creativity and joint working on the part of the skills involved but this is prevented by the faulty communications and lack of mutual trust that bedevil the relationships of architects, engineers, builders and planners. Multi-disciplinary education is the only effective answer and I hope your conference can find ways to make the necessary changes of heart and undo the damage of 1958.

Andrew Derbyshire,
Attendee of the 1st Oxford Conference in 1958

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S.Roaf

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