

In Theory

Wherefore the mere practical architect is not able to assign sufficient reasons for the forms he adopts; and the theoretic architect also fails, grasping the shadow instead of the substance. He who is theoretic as well as practical, is therefore doubly armed; able not only to prove the propriety of his design, but equally so to carry it into execution. — Marcus Vitruvius Pollio

By Sheldon Richard Kostelecky

In light of three quarters of a century of institutionalized Modernist architectural education, the current renewal of interest in and appreciation of traditional and Classically informed architecture and urbanism should give us pause in how we educate our future architects and designers. There is a growing consensus among the general public and architects alike that traditional models and typologies can and should be utilized by today's architects to make our buildings and cities livable and humane once again. There is also an increasing belief that the divide between academic theory and practice should now be revisited and perhaps reconnected by reconsidering historically proven methods of teaching Classical architecture.

In the June 1984 issue of *Architectural Record*, John Hartray, a Chicago, IL-based architect, wrote, "[...] I also think that perhaps some of the time spent in school on design is being spent in a context that's very unrealistic, in that the richness of the real design process grows out of the constraints of the site, the budget, the program, the fact that the owner is changing his mind all of the time." The following year, also in *Architectural Record*, Thomas Fowler IV, then president of the Student Chapters/AIA, added, "there must be a point where we start learning how to be better professionals." Twenty years later, the issue of separation between theory and practice, especially in Classical architecture training, remains an unresolved issue for educators and practitioners alike.

The *École des Beaux Arts* and the atelier system, utilized in various guises in art and architectural education since the mid-17th century, could be useful models in developing new and contemporary pedagogies that re-utilize the 2,600-year body of Classical architecture knowledge that was largely lost during the 20th century. As Vitruvius rightly postulated, theory and practice should be addressed together and equally in order to produce the best architecture. Theory and practice are co-dependent and inseparable. The sum of the two linked together is greater than their parts.

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The *École* model addressed this by utilizing the atelier system, whereby students worked in offices under the tutelage of a patron in an atelier (usually drafting) while simultaneously attending the *École* (studying a coherent theory of Classical design in an academic setting, perhaps under the same patron). The atelier method of fine art and architecture instruction was modeled after the art studios of the 15th to 19th centuries in Europe. Atelier translates in English as "workshop," where working and learning occur simultaneously.

The Boston Architectural College (BAC) in Boston, MA, when making the difficult transition from the predominant Beaux Arts tradition in the mid-1930s to the increasingly prevalent Modernist education system, and unlike most university-level programs of the time, kept the form of the atelier teaching method. Even today, students attend academic classes and studios at the school parttime in the evenings, while being required (and receiving credit) to work in architectural offices either part-time or full-time during the weekdays. The faculty is comprised of area practitioners, further linking practice and theory within the academic setting. While primarily a Modernist school, there has been increasing support at the BAC for the development of historic preservation and traditional residential design coursework, creating a healthy hegemony of divergent design philosophies within the school.

Wentworth Institute of Technology, also in Boston, utilizes the co-op system of combining theory and practice, with knowledge gained in

academia and skills learned in architectural office environments reinforcing each other. The University of Miami School of Architecture in Miami, FL, offers courses in architecture and traditional town planning with input from visiting faculty and other experts such as developers, marketing experts and bankers. Currently, only two American universities offer formal full-time Classical architecture training: The University of Notre Dame (undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate levels), and most recently, Georgia Institute of Technology, with its new one-year postgraduate masters program in conjunction with The Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America in New York (ICA&CA). As additional Classical architecture programs continue to develop at other schools, the atelier method of teaching can be incorporated into those programs to better link theory and practice, as it was historically done.

More typical today, however, is the intentional separation and distinction between theory (school) and practice (real world). Prior to the advent of Modernism in the early-20th century, most American schools of architecture in the late-19th century utilized the *École* as the ideal model of architectural training that combined the two approaches to teaching. Most major architectural schools in the early-20th century had at least one professor who was trained at the *École*, thereby providing a continual thread of academic philosophy linked to the most prestigious architectural school in the world. The Beaux Arts philosophy of designing (and adapting) decorative arts and architecture was based on sound Classical principles (canons) and what has worked well in the past. Although early Modernists had utilized similar principles of the Beaux Arts education, such as understanding the importance of context, function and structural rationality, their interpretation of these principles was quite different. While the Beaux Arts system was based on a coherent and systematic theory of Classical design, where, as with Vitruvius, theory described practice, early (and later) Modernist schools generally operated against the background of social, economic and technological ideologies. In this case theory precedes, or at least tries to predict, practice.

The hierarchical focus on Beaux Arts studio instruction developed design skills in a linear fashion; that is, students advanced through the academy as they proved their mastery of various skills, starting with drawing. This terminated after three years of intensive study in a grand annual competition for the Grand Prix de Rome, a full scholarship for a year of study in Rome. The focus was on learning Classical architecture from the original models of ancient Greece and Rome, and adapting Classical canons developed by Vitruvius, Alberti and other theoreticians to contemporary architecture and city-making.

Perhaps the profession could be better served if a more conscious effort was developed by both educators and practitioners to integrate more real-world examples into studios, to borrow from the atelier model. Some of the studios I attended at both the Harvard Graduate School of Design and at the Notre Dame School of Architecture (both postgraduate studies) had real projects with real clients, and were probably the most productive learning experiences for me and my fellow students. In addition, students can benefit in their studios by spending even some minimal time in offices while attending school, so they gain a better understanding of how buildings actually get built; conversely, offices can benefit by encouraging their junior (and senior) architects to continue to participate in academic settings, to sit on juries and to participate in developing curricula and teaching studios on an adjunct basis that utilize real-world projects and constraints.

Teaching Classical architecture is a complex undertaking (as is learning it); developing and expanding additional opportunities for traditional architectural education by utilizing and adapting historical teaching models to re-link theory and practice per Vitruvius' sound advice can go a long way to contributing to and spreading the base knowledge of Classical architecture in the real world. ■

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