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Old school new school; change in the academy

session prompt

*"...by assuring knowledge, skills and competences with which will render them more flexible, responsive adaptive in the financial and social dynamics.
How adequately do schools detect the trends and demands of the market?"*

Prologue

At the end of the last academic year my undergraduate class held a reunion celebrating thirty years since we had completed our ARB/RIBA Part 1, the first three years of our architectural education and the threshold to our first formal forays into the professional workplace.

We were a relatively small cohort, around thirty-five students, and over the years we studied together had become a close-knit group. Although some of us had kept in touch and met still regularly over the years, curiously this was the first time we had attempted to get everyone together. As the date approached I found I had mixed feelings about the event. While I was curious about meeting people once more and discovering what had become of them, I was also somewhat trepidations. There was a little less novelty in the event for me, I now work where I studied so the reunion would involve me coming to work rather than nostalgically revisiting an old but familiar hunting ground. There was also an element of wondering how people had turned out; would the contemporary "us" be present be a disappointment compared to our younger selves? More significantly, I had my sense of not having moved on – what did I have to show for the past three decades? For me some of the intervening period had been spent in professional practice before moving to becoming at first a practitioner/ educator and then a full time academic (but still an architect none the less). In the event the weekend proved to be very enjoyable and any initial self-consciousness soon evaporated. People were largely as I had remembered them, and the interests, characteristics and beliefs that they displayed as students generally remained, become developed and sometimes amplified in adult persona. On one hand everyone was reassuringly familiar but somehow we had also simultaneously substantially and significantly changed. Peers and tutors had been asked to make a brief presentations about themselves and their work, and as I sat and listened, I found myself thinking about how we were taught, how I aim to teach now and the apparent changes in what I will refer to in the "academy"; the institution, the programme it promotes and the overall educational it provides. This is the starting point for this paper and the lens through which this particular and personal perspective of change in architectural education is viewed.

Introduction

I teach in the school of architecture where I undertook all of my formal academic education. I am not unique in this and several of my colleagues were peers or near peers from my student days. However as Deputy Head of the Mackintosh School, and previously both Head of Postgraduate Studies and Head of undergraduate Studies, I am in a position that offers considerable opportunity to define our ambitions, design the curriculum we offer, and lead staff and students in realising this. This is teamed with the responsibility to consider how the architectural education we offer can recognise the dynamic nature of the architectural profession, how an education can prepare students for future forms of practice and how education can itself help shape that practice.

After over twenty years as in education I now consider my architectural practice to be the academy, and that academy to be the locus for my research as a practitioner. I see myself as much as a practitioner as an educator. To understand that practice, which is complex and dynamic with many actors, cultures and differing values is essential if the academy is to evolve, and to prove the springboard to future practice.

Stasis and Change

The continual flow and flux of education and practice is of interest to me. While these changes are easy to map in retrospect it is much harder to anticipate and predict. While architectural education and practice are connected, the forces that prompt change and their cycles of change are not the same and often result in disconnection rather than continuity. Change is part and parcel of our daily lives. As part of a creative community we regularly speak about change as if we seek it out, welcome and embrace it, even thrive on it; whereas in reality, for the most part, we still find change highly challenging. Our views become settled, if not fixed, very readily if we are not stimulated to consider, develop, reflect and evolve. Leon van Schaik describes how, working with venturesome practitioners who challenge the status quo and innovate, he has come to understand the patterns of activity that mark the move to new knowledge and an advancement of practice,

"our experience entirely parallels that of Howard Gardner's research into the life patterns of highly creative people. From an early age they gyrate between experimentation on the margins of their discipline to seeking recognition at its core. Understanding this oscillation helps practitioners to understand the cycle of energy that they experience." (van Schaik 2013)

Discovering the histories of my peers, how they had changed over the intervening years of practice prompted me to consider how the architectural education provided at the Mackintosh School had changed over the intervening decades, and to what intent and effect. How well had the education we had received thirty years before prepared us for a professional life in architectural practice? Had it prepared us for cycles of risk and consolidation, for future practice or merely educated us to be as the previous generations of graduates?

The Shape of education

In 1983 the Mackintosh School was both a department of the University of Glasgow and of Glasgow School of Art. We were the only students to enjoy this “dual nationality”, which also allowed us to be part of both but also to be unusually somewhat removed from each. The school offered both the Bachelor of Architecture degree and the graduate Diploma in Architecture. It was not unusual for students to remain in the same institution for their full academic education, so we were exposed to a coherent and comprehensive curriculum over a sustained five-year period.

While the Mac attracted a range of inquisitive and venturesome students, geographically most students came if not from the west coast then from Scotland itself. This stemmed from two factors which limited student mobility; student funding, which provided fees and maintenance grants to be paid for all provided they remained within the Scottish educational system; and the fact that students continuing directly from secondary education were a year younger and with different qualifications than their English counterparts.

The Mackintosh School itself was unusual in offering its architecture degree to students on both full and part time modes of study. Part time study was a legacy of the apprenticeship system that had been the predominant route to qualification until the 1958 RIBA Oxford Conference. Elements of architectural education had existed within the Glasgow School of Art since its initial establishment in 1845 as a Government School providing evening classes in drafting, design, composition, drawing from life and life and nature, to apprentices who attended after their working day in practice. By 1983 full time and part time student studied the same cur-



Fig. 1

The cohort of '83.

riculum with lectures and studios extending into the evening to allowing all students to be accommodate in one peer group. While much, including the accommodation and the range of curriculum, had changed, the overall ethos would still have been recognisable to C.R Mackintosh who had pursued his own architectural education there some eighty odd years earlier.

My class, which gained their RIBA part 1 in 1983, was fairly typical of cohorts at the time, in Scottish architecture schools and most university cohorts. The majority had come straight from school, which meant we were seventeen or eighteen years old. The prospect of the length of the course, similar to that of medicine or law, meant that most students wanted to begin their studies as soon as was possible. The gap year hadn't been invented and would have seemed only to postpone the opportunities university offered; the Scottish university system with its four year long undergraduate degree is designed to provide for the student maturing during their studies. Some students had come from farther afield, Edinburgh, Aberdeen even, but there were no overseas student and none from the rest of the UK. There was however a wide range of educational routes into the course, technical, sciences arts, some mixed. The issue was not where you came from but where you wanted to go. To quote Paul Arden, "Its not how good you are, it's how good you want to be," (Arden 2003).

Our teachers were mostly active practitioners, although few had any formal teaching training or post graduate qualification. If you were a good practitioner you were invited to teach, the logic being less about what type of teacher you might be and more about the quality of your practice output. That said our studios were intensive by current standard; we met tutors several times a week and we had ample studio space in which to work round the clock if we wished. Classes were very small by current standards meaning there was little opportunity to hide. In

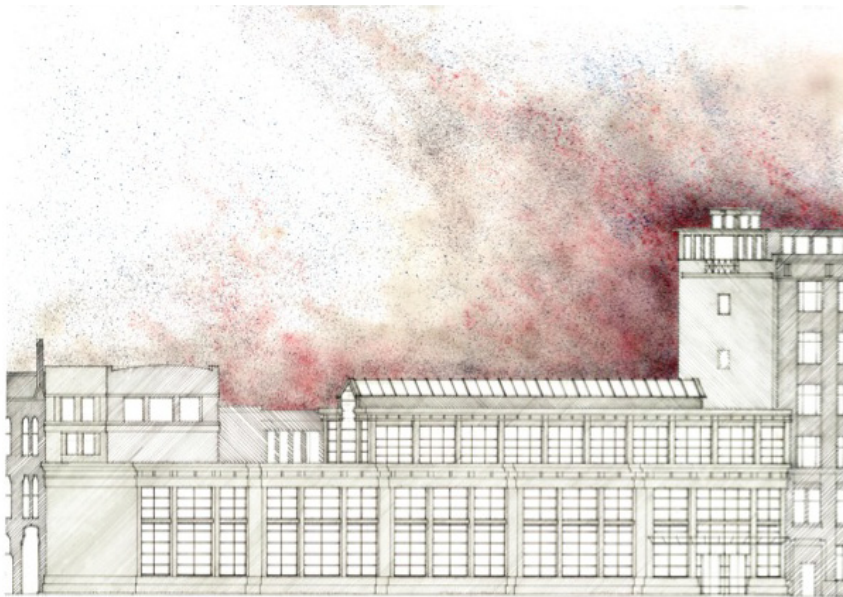


Fig. 2

The profession in 1983.

1980, the final year consisted of 14 students, including two women. At the same time first year numbers had increased to 34, 50% of whom were women.

In retrospect what we were being taught on a daily basis connected to what we saw going on in the city around us. The staff provided a direct link between the teaching studio and architects practice, in a far less mediated way than now. Drawing was the focus of our daily practice, and although we came with a very varied skill set we very soon came to understand that it was means to both explore and promote our ideas. There were fewer sources of information available; we shared certain key issues of journals and books, these were poured over continuously and were the source of lively discussion and argument. The library was a critical resource, as were visiting lecturers. In spite of this or perhaps because of this reduced level of information, we seemed to be very close to anything we were interested in. With a bit of effort on our part most if not everything we needed was accessible to us. We were expected to be intrepid, curious, to be able to recognise the gaps and be able to fill them in.

The shape of practice was more or less universally recognisable and constant to us in 1983, and was a model that perhaps even C.R. Mackintosh would be familiar with. While there were practices who attempted to challenge the status quo these were the exception and not the norm.

Practice was relatively buoyant and the numbers leaving architecture schools largely mapped on to those retiring and leaving the profession. There were also still numerous opportunities to gain experience, in addition to the formal practical year out. Casual labouring work on building sites was available and occasional work in practice allowed us to continue our learning over holiday periods and let us test our skills and resolve. It was inconceivable that you would study architecture without somehow testing what the job would be like on the ground. It was also accepted that the numbers of students in architectural education would mirror the opportunities in the profession and support by the profession for the next generation, a virtuous cycle of training, mentoring and qualification. As students at the Mac we had a single and shared ambition, to become architects. Ahead of us was a relatively steady course to realise that ambition. Having completed our first degree, my peers, without exception found paid work, a "Year Out" as architectural assistants, with the experience formally logged towards their final qualification.

The Year Out

Most students returned to the Mac for their second degree. This was not seen as a lack of ambition but rather completion of a full and holistic programme of study. On completion of the Diploma students qualified within a year, and began the climb up the ladder of practice, through thresholds marking accumulation of experience and towards partner status.

As students our expectations for the future were clear. The trajectory into practice was well defined and generally well supported by practice itself. To become an architect was straightforward and not in doubt, the open question was what kind of architect, where to practice who to work with?

Education now

There have been significant changes across the sector in the past thirty years, not least the numbers of students studying Architecture, with some 15,000 currently enrolled across 41

recognised schools in the UK. This increase is not particular to architecture; higher education has been opened up allowing some 25% of school leavers to pursue education to degree level. However it does present particular challenges within a discipline where there is no longer an explicit connection between the numbers of students studying and the availability of positions within the profession, and therefore the opportunities to develop and pursue a personal practice through the application of the theoretical to the outside world. It is now expected that the market effects supply and demand, influencing the numbers of students who are able to join the profession following their academic education, and theoretically driving the quality of entrants up. As the numbers of students seeking year out positions grow, the opportunities for casual and vacation work diminish meaning many students will have completed a degree before ever having had the opportunity to be exposed to life in practice. This requires a leap of faith on the part of many students not already connected to the profession, and favours those with established networks.

Degree programmes attract now more women students but they still find developing careers in practice problematic; architecture is not seen as a family friendly discipline. The discipline in the UK still does not attract enough people from minority ethnic groups. This may be due to too few relevant role models, as well as a perception that architecture does not have high status or does not pay highly enough. The demographics of students studying architecture show that it has remained dominated by the upper social classes requiring schools to consider how to increase widening participation and diversify the basis of recruitment.

Student debt has become a significant across the UK with the introduction of tuition fees, although there are no tuition payable by Scottish students. Given the comparatively low salaries architects command compared to other professions, this has become one of the significant considerations for students, schools and professional bodies. Demonstrating value for money and more critically employability is essential if programmes wish to have a strong base from which they can recruit.

The Mackintosh School remains one of the three schools that make up the Glasgow School of Art, which is now defined as a Small Specialist Institution by the Scottish Funding Council, allowing the focus to continue to be on the disciplines of Architecture, Design and Fine Art. We form an intensive creative community, focused in a way that larger institutions would find impossible. Studio practice remains at the core of what we do on a day-to-day basis, and our viewpoint on architectural education is formed and reformed through this. However what interests me more is how the Mac has developed over the last three decades, what direction its evolution has taken and what impact that has had on its students.

Within the Mac, while the overall school has increased in size the most significant changes have been in other aspects of provision. The curriculum is now more closely structured and defined as with all degree programmes, a resultant of subject benchmarking, and the defining of national qualification and credit standards. There is considerable reflection on how subjects can articulate and can be integrated to form a coherent and ambitious programme of study. Project briefs offer the opportunity for staff to set up challenging and supportive learning events and to further refine the agreed objectives of each year. The studio space, which provides a working environment for all students, is the locus for experimentation, discussion and testing, and key to establishing a studio stretching well beyond the timetabled day.

Staff remain a mixture of full time academics and practitioners. It is however, now much more likely that senior staff and subject specialist are actively engaged in research rather than practice. This has partly been the resultant of increasing academic workloads and institutional level commitments, while the demands of indemnity insurance have made intermittent practice activity a difficult business model to sustain. Three cycles of the Research Assessment Exercise or subsequent Research Excellence Framework have also required research to be formalised, open to peer review and audit and available to external audiences.

Practitioners form part of the teaching teams across all years. The demands of contemporary practice and the intensive nature of teaching mean that the significant balance of their time remains in the field of practice. Studio teams attempt to deploy the time available focused towards student contact. This allows practitioners to connect directly to students but allows less input to the development of the curriculum, the design of teaching events or other aspects of the learning and teaching environment. However the recognition that delivering a state of the art education requires you to consider how your educators are equipped for the task has led to the professional accreditation of teaching, with academics now routinely expected to hold a teaching qualification as well as a discipline based expertise. Along with several colleagues I completed a Postgraduate Certificate in learning and Teaching in 2008, and this has now become a contractual obligation for new staff. While the cost of the programme is borne by the institution, the time commitment for fractional staff in practice can be problematic. Another barrier to staff engaging with this can be the expectation that experience is a direct substitute for pedagogic training, and this is a harder obstacle to overcome.



Fig. 3
The cohort of '13.

Looking at the cohort of 2013 standing in the very same spot on the Mackintosh steps I can't help think they remind me of my own year group. Both photographs, taken just before Degree Show opens, capture the confidence and uncertainty of the situation; no longer students but then not yet architects either. When I consider the cohort of students who completed their degree thirty years after my own, there are similarities to my own peer group, but in many ways the situation has changed dramatically.

The student population is now very diverse. Mac students come from across Europe, the Far East and North America, as well as from the UK. Students have chosen to study here, and have had to succeed in a highly competitive selection process. In the Diploma in Architecture, the ARB/RIBA part 2, they have often have chosen to come to be able to immerse themselves in the making of architecture for two years, and to be confronted with the challenge of synthesising design, urban and technological thinking to a high level of resolution. The complex and messy business of making Architecture is confronted rather than avoided, a much more difficult path to travel. In that sense the ethos is very similar to what I experienced as a student. While the objective has remained largely the same, the environment has altered. Student numbers have risen and levelled out as approximately 80 students in each of the five years of the professional programmes. It is unlikely that this will change; having experienced larger cohorts working their way the structure, we recognise that beyond a certain critical mass momentum, collegiality and peer learning become much more illusive. A more appropriate way to develop the Mac portfolio may be to consider the existing range of expertise and to consider what complimentary areas of study could grow in parallel to the core professionally validated and prescribed programmes.



Fig. 4

The same studios remain the focus of student and staff engagement. Students continue to have an individual workspace although these are densely planned and very intensely occupied. The drawing boards have gone, replaced by laptops, and as each year progresses increasing piles of models, prototypes of building elements and other evidence of testing at scale and full size. The studio is complimented by workshop spaces for making, a critical partnership across the institution. While there may not be the same opportunities for experiencing the office there is an established regime of testing and critiquing the proposal from inception to completion that did not necessarily exist thirty years earlier.

Student expectations have shifted too. They are aware of the competitive situation that awaits them on graduation, just as for the most part they had to compete for their place on the programme. They are also conscious that the choices that they make on their journey through their architectural training will shape the architect they become, by putting together a highly individual and customised portfolio of education and experience, which no two students will share.

An architectural education provides a springboard leading to many potential career choices rather than determining one. Do they wish to become an architect? If so what type of architect do they want to become? Working in what type and scale of practice, and to what end? These are some of the questions that they need to ask themselves to prepare for the career beyond. In the final year, this exploration is encouraged and supported by staff through a critical self reflection inviting students to confirm their strengths and weaknesses, identifying how they wish to develop their skill set and knowledge base to work towards achieving their own goals and to define how staff may directly aid them in this. The aim is for students to recognise themselves as actors in their own futures rather than merely participants, and to utilise staff as consultants rather than remaining dependent on staff to determine their futures.

This was particularly important given the recent recession that has affected the global economy with national and regional repercussions. Given the direct impact on the construction industries and the vulnerability of architectural practice, this has prompted many students to rethink their attitudes and preconceptions about the profession.

For some the uncertainty of the contemporary profession offers opportunities to travel, sample and try many different options and perhaps also to challenge the recognised forms of architectural practice, for others the same uncertainty can be daunting and disabling. They also find they have much more in common with students in fine art and design for whom there

'83	'13
study	study
graduate	graduate
qualify	qualify perhaps
architect	architect perhaps
associate	practice where
partner	partner in what

Fig. 5
Responding to contemporary profession.

may not be a defined profession awaiting, but have to begin to develop their own personal approach to practice while still a student.

We are our own research

I am now one of the tutors responsible for leading students through this very particular education, and for determining exactly what that education should contain. For me the most interesting issue for a school of architecture is whether it should respond to the demands of the contemporary profession or attempts to prepare students for future practice. Any educa-

RELATIONSHIPS

Blind date Robert Mantho, Architecture tutor, 50ish, meets Sally Stewart, deputy head, 40ish

Robert on Sally

What were you hoping for?

A good listener

First impressions?

She talks as much as my wife, another piece of work

What did you talk about?

Changing the world or at least the upper school

Any awkward moments?

I didn't notice, is that not a

British thing?

Best thing about Sally?

Can handle a cup of tea

Would you introduce her to your friends?

Hmm, why would I introduce my boss to my friends?

What did you agree on?

The revolution, if we ever have time

Will you meet again?

Yes, around the tutorial table every Thursdays



Sally on Robert

What were you hoping for?

Something new, a partner in crime

First impressions?

Small, lively, plenty to say for himself

What did you talk

Students, changing the world,

being driven to drink, trying

to get a word in edgewise

Any awkward moments?

Translating from American - what exactly is a "piece of work"?

Would you introduce him to your friends?

Yes, he would probably charm them as he does students

Best thing about Robert?

Positivist view and concern for others

What did you agree on?

Most of the seventies some of the eighties,

Will you meet again?

Every Thursday during term time

The Guardian Weekend 12th April 99

Fig. 6

tion in some way mirrors the context and circumstances of its time. The contemporary context requires academics to reflect on how an architectural education can prepare students for a professional world, where cycles of change are frequent and the role of the architect is by no means recognised. To this end a significant part of our research activity is into the nature of pedagogy in architecture, studio practice and the development of communities of practice. This research also becomes material for discussions in the studio, forming an explicit link between our research and our teaching, but also allowing students to become aware of how they can continue to learn, reposition and recharge their practice over time through reflection and challenging the orthodoxy. The ongoing challenge is how can we ensure that the practice of architectural education shares equal status to the practice of architecture, and rethink the contribution the academy can make to the architectural profession,

“thus the most important obligation now... is to break out of the tired old teaching versus research debate and define, in more creative ways what it means to be a scholar.” (Boyer 1990).

Epilogue

30 years on how did we measure up?

With the advantage of hindsight it's easy to see how we could have done things differently as undergraduates. That part of our shared history is familiar, even more so after a few hours of catching up and viewing the many photographs we took of ourselves in the pre-digital age. What is clear and perhaps more surprising is how our rigorous but relatively traditional education equipped us for the future, and supported our individual aspirations and trajectories. Lets hope the same will be true thirty years from now.

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