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Discussion: Are Architecture Students Hermits?

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10. DISCUSSION
ARE ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS HERMITS?

Does the isolation in studio hinder our ability to design?
Something that I have been thinking about recently, and spurned on by Hesse’s talk, is architectural education and the “hermit” like approach many people bring to studio culture. It’s a running gag that we spend all our time in studio, but beneath this gag is a veil of truth.

What I found to be thought provoking about Hesse’s talk was that so much of the work was being developed outside of a sterile white cube of the modern gallery. All of the projects had been pushed out into society and interacting with the people they were creating for. The artist was entering a “Post-Disciplinary” approach and traversing across social class, in turn creating meaningful spaces and objects, not because some curator had christened it as “art” but because it was benefiting and bringing awareness to society. They were directly engaging the “real world” much like our “architecture” will. Yet here we are as students, in our studios, creating for.....what? A grade/piece of paper that says we graduated? Do you think your education gives you the way to look at society and find your opportunity to engage in it?

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I feel that this must be an internal drive, people must be genuinely interested in society and what it has to offer them. Maybe a question is how is this interest sparked. Clearly it varies from individual to individual, but are there similarities or themes that can be pulled out?

It’s the notion that by doing a little bit of research at the beginning of the project we are automatically experts on the culture/client we are designing for and that our decisions from that point forward are well informed and for the best, when in reality, they are mostly just presumptuous.

But then that brings up our actual education. I think Deanna is right about internal drive. Our professors are supposed to teach us more of the practice of designing a building and so maybe it’s up to us then to fulfill the other half of architecture and simply absorb as much as possible. The “practice” side demands such extreme time commitments that really we are allowed to absorb little else. Perhaps this is why all the famous/great architects don’t reach this fame until they’re old, and have had a more time to take in the world around them and actually understand the scope and contexts that go along with their projects.
hermetic (hur - met - ik)
adjective
1. made airtight by fusion or sealing
2. not affected by outward influence or power; isolated

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I feel like being a studio hermit has many advantages - I am reminded of two fairly nauseating quotes, first is ‘absence makes the heart grow stronger’, this idea that the more you leave the world (this could be by going to studio, or by playing a video game or reading a book) the more you can bring back to the real world, and the more you can appreciate the real world. Just the act of juxtaposing worlds starts a conversation of what is working and what is not. The second quote is ‘the further within myself I go, the further into the world I can reach’. There is an obvious tension here, where talents honed somewhat in private (thinking of drawing, studio) can take one places and influence others further than if one were to always engage socially/outwardly rather than inwardly.

‘The further within myself I go, the farther out to the world I can reach’ - Chaiwat Thirapantu

One more thing on my mind, which speaks to being generalists - Architecture tends to be the ‘slowest’ of the arts, progressing at a rate which the people with the money who need things built feel comfortable (how often can we test smarter building materials and technologies, if concrete and masonry have been employed successfully for centuries? Who would take the risk?). It seems that technological advancements (which should be fundamental to architecture) happen one ‘smart facade’ at a time...how does one push, and really bring architecture back to the edge of the human pool of knowledge? Would we be okay if the profession’s ‘finest hour’ was over?
From an education stand-point, we have so many more options based upon professors given their backgrounds and options that an architecture degree can be applied towards. While we’ve covered this many times in our meetings, these options also pose a threat. They seem to indicate that individuals attempting to pursue a career in this profession can’t “do/have it all”. We’re actually attempting the impossible at points throughout our time here. We attempt to harness all of these fragments of options knowing that we can never fully understand each holistically.

Maybe this is where the ‘hermit’ effect comes into play. We have the feeling that we need to understand as much as possible with the knowledge that parts of what we study here is not yet defined by much of society (and may not even exist in 5 years much less a decade from now). A majority of this understanding comes from application in a studio setting. How do you change this mindset? Is it really the mindset that needs to changed?

I just think that this is a justification for spending less time in studio, which is okay. However, this profession requires a lot of effort in understanding and integrating the various systems that today’s buildings require. We, as architecture students, are still very nieve in our understanding and the hours spent now is a reflectance of how much effort this profession takes. Also, unless you know what to look for and understand when visiting a precedent, it will not be of any benefit to you. Being an architecture student definitely degrades your quality of life, but it’s a sacrifice made for being passionate about the realm of design.

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Doesn’t this have to do with the typical “Architect is Generalist” dogma? [“An architect is a generalist, not a specialist - the conductor of a symphony, not a virtuoso who plays every instrument perfectly.” - Matthew Frederick] It seems to me that the Architect HAS to be a generalist, not so much because he or she is confined to the studio, but because it would be impossible to become an expert in every field that the Architect reaches. Why are we so afraid to say “I don’t know?” It seems more presumptuous to me to act like we COULD know master a particular culture or client than to act like we have. So, then, what is the Architect to do? Maybe he or she must admit and subsequently negotiate these holes. Maybe it’s less about saying: “yes, I know X to be true” and more about saying “I can probably never know if X is true or not, nor do I have the time or faculties to faithfully pursue this, so now my work must reflect the understanding that I cannot know this”

*Why are we so afraid to say “I don’t know?”.*

Tony Gonzalez