Koolhaas fails to impress

Teaching and teachers

A superficial approach to shopping?
As an architect involved in the design of many shopping centres in the UK and Europe over the past 25 years, I feel moved to respond to the interview with Rem Koolhaas in your last issue (arq 5/3). Regrettably, as I write, the Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping is not yet available: I can therefore only comment on the interview.

Koolhaas, perhaps for reasons of brevity, makes a number of generalizations that certain do not reflect the reality of shopping centre design in the UK and Europe. He argues that architects have largely ignored this building type – but in the UK there are a handful of architectural practices that have devoted considerable effort and innovative thought in this field which has resulted in some excellent buildings, generating international interest.

Koolhaas generalizes about shopping centre design. While that may be appropriate for schemes built in the ’60s and ’70s, schemes built in the ’80s and ’90s have encompassed a vast variety of solutions. There are in-town schemes, out-of-town and edge-of-town ones. There are schemes in historic town centres, retail parks, supermarket and hypermarket based schemes. Currently, much effort is placed on leisure based schemes and mixed developments.

It is likely that the European experience differs from that in the US in as much as the historic roots of towns in the UK and Europe are far stronger than in the US. Roman towns, Saxon settlements and medieval development have had a profound effect on shopping centre location and layout in Europe, while many of the US centres have grown with urban and suburban sprawl within the last 150 years. Nor, indeed, should we ignore the influence of nineteenth-century arcades on the covered shopping streets in Europe.

The interview failed to draw out the profound influence of the economic and commercial forces on the development of shopping centres. There are important issues of land ownership, town planning controls, traffic management, tenant mix, demographic research, the availability of anchor stores, and rates of retail return to be considered before a scheme can begin to be tested for financial viability. Sadly none of this was discussed at the interview but I trust it forms part of the Harvard research.

The contributions of Rem Koolhaas and others to enlightened thought and discussion on this important area of architecture are welcome. For many people, shopping is an important aspect of their lives not only for functional reasons but also for social and leisure purposes. After we completed the design and construction of the Lakeside shopping centre at Thurrock, I was struck by the importance of the scheme as a focal point for social interchange. Commercial architecture is often scorned and belittled by architects who have little knowledge or understanding of the economic forces that drive development, but the effect of these buildings on the public is profound. It is to be hoped that more young architects take up the challenges presented by this area of work.

Henry Herzberg
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Henry Herzberg is a partner in Chapman Taylor

Less than interesting
Does Giles Oliver (letters, arq 5/3) mean to connect the success of the Tate Modern in ’sucking in huge crowds’ with the success of architectural education? Both in his view seem suspect achievements. The Tate is not proper architecture – it is too brutish and poorly lit – while current architectural education avoids all that is proper to architecture. His message is that both public and consumer opinion counteth for nought in these matters. But what else have professionals ever said?

Particularly the generations brought up to believe that unpopularity was architecture’s native condition. Frankly I am rather encouraged by the popularity of supposedly arcane subjects like modern art, modern architecture and architectural education. At least we seem to be getting one thing right. Not that I am advocating complacency. Keeping anything alive in our management sodden culture is tricky, particularly the kind of creative team spirit required to make projects work.

Most product advertising works on the basis of positive marketing, on making its products desirable in some way. It is the political adverts that play on fear and indulge in lampoon and mud-slinging. But then politics is not so popular these days. Perhaps fashion can teach us some cunning here. Which period then politics is not so popular these days. Perhaps fashion can teach us some cunning here. Which period would you like to revive? Add a bit of flair and imagination I am sure we could get some interest going in a ’60s revival. The point is that you have to keep reinventing what is good, or interesting or valuable – and make it so. There is nothing intrinsically boring in any aspect of architectural education any more.
than there ever has been popular disinterest in matters of skill or communication or technical competence or civic manners. So why make such aspects of architectural education less than interesting?

Helen Mallinson
London

Helen Mallinson teaches at the University of North London and took part in the last RIBA Review of Education

The architect and the academy

David Porter's letter in *arq* 5/3 was timely. In recognizing the benefits to be gained from the ‘two-way street’ that connects architectural education and practice, Porter follows on from Robin Webster's plea for 'ordinary' practitioners to teach 'a high standard of ordinariness'. Webster's letter was provoked by Dean Hawkes' paper, ‘The architect and the academy’ (*arq* 4/2), in which he quoted Kahn, Zumthor and Scarpa on education, all regarding teaching as a process of (self) discovery.

Hawkes also questioned the way in which academic knowledge should be interpreted to sustain the act of invention at the heart of design. He claimed that it is here that the 'practising designer can make a central contribution... the discipline of architecture must be founded on the accumulated production of the professional activities of architects'. He recognized that practising architects are also developing theories and research through live, built or unbuilt, projects.

In 1975, working with Dick Cannon and others on Cardinal Newman High School in Lancashire – probably the last large secondary school built in the West of Scotland before the recent PFI (private funding) initiatives, there was available a large body of research and accumulated data, with a large helping of dogma, to inform the design process. Feedback from the inevitable failures and dissatisfied users all contributed to an evolving design process.

In those days, school buildings were seen, not as containers for the act of education, but as positive influences on the educational process. From the deep naturally-lit plan forms of the '30s and '40s to the open-plan non-class based teaching of the '70s, architectural and educational theory were indivisible. This methodology, admittedly imperfect, has been lost in the formulaic responses of recent years. Today, when PFI developers see a school as a potential office block in any fall-back scenario, there is no other means of appraising value. Loose fit can only be taken so far, however. Around that time, in the mid '70s, my teachers Tom Markus and Tom Mavor also talked about design as a definitive process – analysis – synthesis – design – appraisal. This must still be the absolute in practice. However poorly documented or even anecdotal, it nevertheless informs subsequent designs. The process can be revolutionary but is more often evolutionary.

Recently, Winy Maas of MVRDV spoke at the Lighthouse – Scotland's National Centre for Architecture and Design in Glasgow. MVRDV's work, in common with that of Ben van Berkel, is indicative of a movement among contemporary Dutch architects, perhaps even a Dutch phenomenon, dating back to the 1970s and the work of Habraken, in which architectural form is informed by data gained through the methodology outlined above. This bridges any divide between design and research. Indeed, theirs is a redefinition of the architect's multi-disciplinary team role as that of a kind of public/urban scientist.

Last year, I participated in a seminar to engineers in Arup. The subject was creativity in engineering – how could engineers become more creative? They came from all over the world and were, of course, extremely creative – what was missing was precisely this continuum between theory and practice connecting the conceptual to the practical and giving it some depth of meaning. When engineering history and design theory are left behind at university, pragmatism takes over. The same is true of architects.

As Robin Webster suggested, we should encourage the ‘two-way street’ between practice and academia (with practitioners teaching for free, if necessary). Such an arrangement would be particularly advantageous where practitioners are evolving urban planning and design theories that respond to current issues. The benefit to the profession as well as the schools would be immeasurable. Indeed, measurability may be the problem – one of evaluating benefits, to the student, to the academic and to the education authority, as much as to the profession.

Over forty years ago, the Glasgow School of Art instituted a course in which day-release and a one-week full-time block per term permitted the student to work in an architectural practice and participate in a ‘part-time’ course. Reconciling education with employment was not easy but it did permit the student to relate academic studies to practice. However, while this course successfully monitored and evaluated course-work it largely failed to ensure rigour and appropriate tasks in the workplace. But the possibility of its revival is supported in varying degrees by the profession. It could be a first step to rediscovering fields of research, theory and analysis in architectural practice, which were lost about twenty-five years ago.

As Robert Maxwell asserted in *arq* 4/1, we need to adopt a more realistic attitude to artistic aspirations as a natural component of studying architecture while, at the same time, strengthening the ways by which the actual performance of buildings can be tested. Just as understanding architecture and the built environment must start in primary schools, challenging dogma must start in schools of architecture.

Gordon C. Murray
Glasgow

Gordon Murray is a partner in Gordon Murray and Alan Dunlop. He is involved in various aspects of architectural education at both the Glasgow School of Art and the University of Strathclyde

Thermal issues

Max Fordham's perceptive comments (letters, *arq* 5/3) raise many interesting points on building physics and the environmental performance of buildings. Our article (*arq* 5/1) summarizes a research project that environmentally analyzed trends in Danish housing design. The results showed that the typical design strategies advocated by ‘traditional’ low-energy and passive housing design methods (large glass areas and heavy thermal mass) are not necessarily the most optimal. Such strategies only take account of the heating demand and do not use modern life-cycle analysis methodologies where the environmental impact of the building materials is also integrated.

In relation to thermal mass, a new Danish report on superinsulated housing has shown
that a large thermal mass gives minimal reductions in heating demand in comparison to lighter constructions, and that many simplified energy calculation methods wrongly overestimate the benefits of thermal mass. In superinsulated housing, the building's mass is kept so warm that there is no meaningful temperature difference across the building fabric to store usable energy in.

In relation to glazing areas, as Max Fordham rightly points out, increasing south-facing glazing areas does give reductions in heating demand, but there is certainly not a linear relationship, so the advantages are very small. The thermal mass in superinsulated housing is not able to store all this solar energy, so the useful solar gains are greatly reduced.

On top of this, most 'flagship' Danish passive solar housing projects have given very serious comfort problems. In one project, the residents had to wear sunglasses indoors because of glare problems and, in another, residents began hiring electrical air-conditioning units to hold the summer temperatures down at a reasonable level. If very large glazing areas do not give substantial reductions in heating demand, why design-in a feature that cannot help but give problems in the summer? As Baker & Steemers point out, 'both too much and too little daylight can give comfort problems.'

When the environmental impact from the building materials is added into the environmental analysis, then the results further underline our arguments. Both heavyweight materials and large areas of aluminium-framed glazing have an embodied environmental impact that is larger than the savings they give from reducing the heating demand. Max Fordham rightly points out that designers should start thinking about how embodied energy can be reduced, and comes up with some good examples. We hope to analyze some of these aspects in a new research project, The Environmental House, which has just received support from the Danish Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs.

Several of Max Fordham's comments refer to larger building types such as offices, which have very different environmental problems in comparison to housing; and where the emphasis is on reducing internal heat gains to make natural ventilation a viable alternative. From a life-cycle perspective that includes the environmental impact of building materials, it is likely that thermal mass in office design should have a positive effect, since the CO2 savings that can be made by reducing the cooling load are typically three times higher than heat load savings. To the best of our knowledge, this area of research has yet to be cultivated in any depth.

As Max Fordham rightly points out, careful analysis is critical in identifying the correct design issues, and this is what we have tried to show in our environmental analysis. Over the last 20–30 years there has been a huge change both in the thermal performance of buildings and in our environmental knowledge. It is therefore not surprising that some 'traditional' low energy and passive solutions are less applicable, and that new broadly-based 'sustainable design' solutions are becoming more relevant!

Rob Marsh
Horsens, Denmark

Asplund would have been amazed

60 years too late

Every contributor to arq is sent a number of free copies of the issue by the publisher. Recently, some complimentary copies were despatched to Gunnar Asplund (the author of the 'document' paper in arq 5/2) at the Weslch (sic) School of Architecture in Cardiff. They were, of course, meant for Simon Unwin and Christina Johnsson, the introducer and translator of Asplund's inaugural lecture. It may happen again ...

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