

Society, Materiality and an **Architectural Education**

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Students of architecture, industrial design and interior design at Virginia Tech engage in an impromptu discussion of work in the design studio.

Courtesy: Robert Dunay

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Our world presents a cacophony of interests and products. The electronic and digital environments increasingly promote a seamless flow of advertisement. Overtly and subliminally, an unbridled mania to consume influences many of our decisions. We come to believe that the possessions we station around ourselves are indispensable for revealing to others why we are different, and perhaps better. Status, not stature, dominates the daily interchange of individuals through belongings. In this consumer society the sign value of a product replaces its existence as a thing. The image projected by objects in everyday life, and the magnification of that image, serves to imprint oneself on society.

Products are accumulated for their ability to enhance personal identity. Everyone walks around with their own headlines stapled to their chests. This may be an inevitable dynamic of society. Ever since the tenets of modernism began to erode in the 1970s, there has been a radical rethinking. The rational and analytical foundations of design as posited by the Bauhaus and its German successor, the Ulm School of Design, were overthrown by a much freer and open approach. The abstract purity of Braun gave way to the psychological, symbolic and poetic works of groups such as the Italian collaborative Memphis in the 1980s. Functionalist design and its attendant characteristics of homogeneity, structural clarity and perfection were replaced by visions from pop art and pop culture. Everything suddenly was possible. Design became fun, immensely popular, and accessible to the mass market.

The design studio is not immune. In some quarters, the cornerstone of architectural education suffered from commod-

itization as students were regarded as customers. Students of architecture reveled in the newfound potentials of expressing oneself through design - self-expression became indistinguishable from self-disclosure. In reaction, the critique of the design studio as insular, detached and disenfranchised from contemporary issues arrived on its regular interval (every four or five years). Calls for the overhaul or dismantling of the design studio found their way into editorials, erudite papers and the administrator's stump speeches. The educational bankruptcy of the studio once again became a seasonal mantra for those seeking recognition in the education conference circuit.

Sometimes it is best to hold one's head low until the debris passes over. Arnold Schoenberg commented towards the end of his career that his music was not tainted by success because he was "protected by neglect." In three words he defined both the province and refuge of the studio. It is not part of a methodology just as it is not a curriculum element. The studio environment depends on individuals building a real place allowing for the occasion of education. It is a sphere of knowledge embedded in activity commensurate with a finely tuned instrument that must be played every day, managed every week and examined every semester. It is one of the few forums by which the tendency of architecture as commodity can be resisted through an iterative asking of fundamental questions - how to stay relevant without sacrificing ideals; how to complete projects without compromising ideas; and how to sell concepts without selling one's soul.

It is little wonder that the members of Memphis disbanded and went on to other things. Their work was a polemic. The impact was not intended to have staying power, nor was it intended to throw out the entire history of design. As a salvo by the avant-garde against the status quo, their goal was to break what had become sterile and stagnant, and open new possibilities. The many who attempted to follow could not handle the luxury of unrestrained freedom. Any effort un-renewed exhausts itself under its own weight. The movement's followers, lacking ideals and the vital energy of its founders, have fallen by the wayside, suffering from the vicissitudes of caprice, mannerism, empty form and hollow rhetoric.

Chaos theory tells us that the flap of a butterfly's wings in a remote province in China is capable of changing the weather patterns in North America. Though the chance of altering consumerist values in today's society is remote, the possibility to shift the discussion remains. The design studio remains the place to provide a foundation to navigate in a world of diversity through slowness of approach and redundancy of questions. It causes one to reflect upon the nature of design and re-examine its place and potential in the world. Thus, the true efficacy of the studio seeks introspection over entertainment. It is a probe set out with the hope of discovering essence. It follows the distant trajectory of an ideal, while freezing an instant of the process.