

Architecture

- field of activity or knowledge

by Bengt Ahlqvist



Bengt Ahlqvist,
Stockholm.

In this article the author calls for revitalization and reestablishment of design profession. And to achieve a better result, he suggests among others a curriculum that promotes design training through more theoretical studies in favor of increasing the practical experiences in design and planning.

AS OUR ENVIRONMENTS PROVES that good architecture and design not can be regarded as a given outcome of the efforts of the profession, it can be suspected that the process that constitutes the results of the professions activities suffers from certain imperfections and or is restrained by some obstacles.

If one accepts architecture as the built expression of the predominant social, economical, political and cultural conditions, ideas and valuations in a certain period, a study of those conditions may explain important developments in the history of architecture and planning. We will then learn about how changes in the distribution of power are reflected in the built environment and find that the architectural profession hardly can claim that it, during any period and to any greater extent, has shaped the development of society. That does not mean that architects, through history, have been neither unimportant

nor powerless. As planners and designers of buildings and environments they have been, and still are, one of the most influential tools for the implementation of societies, and its rulers, aims and goals. This puts the question of whether their work is based on knowledge of its consequences or if it is to be regarded as a mere activity, to its head.

History tells us that neither economical development nor its subsequent political ambitions are without influence on planning and architecture. Cities and buildings are the most obvious illustrations of the development, liquidation, revival etc of values and ideas within society as a whole. Of this follows that an awareness of values in force ought to be of guidance for its planners and designers.

Mistakes in planning and building are very difficult and expensive to correct or hide. We have to live with them even when we have for-

gotten what they were aimed at achieving. More or less general consent about certain aims and goals can quickly be forgotten, especially if the outcome of their materialisation turns out to be unsuccessful. Still, as the architects are the claimed experts, the public may with right argue that a principal demand on any professional operation should be an understanding of the consequences of their works.

An architect regarded as succesful within the professions subculture is one who gets his designs not only executed but also published in the magazines of the profession. Unfortunately this attitude seems to exclude general appreciation of alternative careers. As any group in any society is dependant on an understanding of its ideals by influential representatives of politics and other spheres of power it would certainly help if the architects were more widely spread outside their traditional field of activity.

The group of architects that are generally acknowledged within the profession is very limited, the group that is known to a greater public is of course even more restricted. Their works are to some extent known although in many cases rather as images than actual buildings and environments. Consequently, what originally may have been an architectural work based on an analysis of its site and other conditions as well as the functions it should serve, stands the risk of being reduced to an image of itself copied with varying success.

Archetypes, originally connected to specific functions, have always formed a base for the development in design and planning. It was the architects of the 19th century who, faced with new tasks, started to use the archetypes for new types of buildings and even mix them.

Functionalism learned us to discard the symbolism in architectural forms but did not replace the classical architects knowledge about form and its significanse with any new knowledge of the same fundamental and percieveable character. The functionalists instead taught us that form should follow function and thus that design should be based on a scientifique and care-

ful analysis of conditions, demands and techniques. Unfortunately the implementation of that message proved difficult. The ambition to make the design work into a concious process failed to a large extent and what we got was an architecture which, mostly regardless of tradition and climate, produced new archetypes of an even bigger scale, an internationalism which almost by definition excluded consideration of local traditions as well as all other kinds of specific conditions. As a late reaction to that we then got postmodernism which just dressed the same onebuilding-sized archetypes in fragments of classical orders and other decorative elements.

Also the content of the architects work changed as urbanisation, the development of traffic, massive investment in housing as well as many other tendencies in society developed and demanded rational planning and designing methods and procedures. And indeed it got them, to such an extent that one may ask if they not quickly got out of the hands of the architects. In fact the rational of functionalism quickly developed into something that was so simplified that it could be coped with by almost anyone and consequently made generations of architects believe that the knowledge demanded for the execution of their profession was very easily obtained.

I believe most schools of architecture still foster that misunderstanding. Certainly knowledge can be obtained through experience and practical work. However that method may bring about exposing society to some inevitable mistakes underway. Any method of achieving professional maturity is eased by the possession of a foundation of basic knowledge. It is the evident responsibility of the schools of architecture to give its students such a base.

Therefore, I will not hesitate to propose curriculums that promotes theoretical studies in favour of the practical training in design and planning. Furthermore I do not think it is possible to procure that knowledge to any greater extent through studies in form of design programs alone.

I am quite aware that this can give three alternative consequences:

- the education has to be longer in terms of semesters and years or,
- the education has to be supplemented with additional training or,
- the young architects will enter the profession with less design training.

I consider all three alternatives superior to what we have now if it can give society architects with better basic knowledge within the relevant subjects and, most important, a deeper understanding of the knowledge that ought to govern the acts of building and planning including those undertaken by by other specialists outside the architects profession.

I may explain this seemingly very conservative opinion by declaring that I profoundly consider that we have reached a point in the development of our profession, as well as within the building and construction sector of the economy as a whole, that is very close to the dead end of a cul-de-sac. A long period of almost continuous expansion with everincreasing demand for new buildings and plans, a period that has produced not only more buildings than any other period in the history but also a previously unseen amount of devastating mistakes, has come to its end.

In the future society will certainly have use for a limited amount of brilliant designers as construction, redevelopment and rehabilitation, even if it will slow down, of course will not stop. My point is that it is neither the prime responsibility nor within the capacity of the schools of architecture to promote them, they will turn up anyhow. (On the contrary I rather think that it is likely that more talents gets the chance to develop if they are given base to work from. At least that will give them a chance, one way or the other, to enter into the profession, something which is likely to demand a considerable inventiveness and flexibility with regard to tasks and working situations.)

What society is in greater need for is more competence within planning and building as a whole, including its implementation. One im-

portant reason for that is that we, at least in this country, have a building industry that is the only sector of the economy that has succeeded in considerably increasing its costs per unit, inflation excluded, during a period when all other sectors of the economy, have managed to reduce its costs per unit in real terms. This may be explained by the fact that investments in research and development within the construction industry is, and has always been, much less than in all other sectors of the economy.

As the changes required include the actual organisation of the building industry, comparative studies of other sectors of the economy are of interest. What we then are likely to find is a marked tendency to steer and organise design and production in new ways in order to reduce use of material as well as number of hours required. This is achieved by designing the products in so that they are easy to assemble. In other words the production methods are given a marked influence on the design. Swedish building industry tried that, in a rather primitive manner, during the sixties.

When now the demand for cost reductions in building industry will come back, society needs architects who have knowledge about production techniques and methods in order to avoid a repetition of these old mistakes. Lack of engagement in matters of this sort can only result in two things, either hardly any production at all because of costs, or, a production organised along lines that gives no regard to the qualities the architects are trying to maintain and guard.

Another method applied in industry aimed at cutting costs is reducing the distance between management and development on one hand and production on the other. This is done for example by organising the actual assembly work on the shop floor along different lines including giving the workers more responsibility and by moving some of the design and development specialists out on to the shop-floor, all in order to save time and unnecessary middle-management. We have seen hardly anything of that in building industry. To a certain extent we have even experienced the

contrary with contractors who instal more and more administration in between the designers, beeing the architects and the technical consultants, and the building site. It is an illustrative paradox that the distance between the designing architect and the building site seems to be increasing in a time when we at our have disposal tele- and computer-technique that can cut that distance to fractions of a second.

If the architects fail to participate in the necessary modernisation of the design a building process and continue to regard the design process more as an end in itself, they are likely to loose even more of the influence they once had.

Architects, who during the end of the eighties were overloaded with design work under conditions ideal at least for their self-indulgence are now underemployed or not employed at all. It is unlikely that they will ever experience conditions of the kind typical for the past few years. This may, quite naturally, cause a feeling of despair but could, on the other hand be regarded as an opening to a revitalisation and a reestablishment

of the profession. Whether this will occur, that is to say if the present crisis can initiate a positive changes, is something which is very much in the hands of the members, organisations and institutions of the profession.

Instead of being determined by its main fields of activities, primarily planning and designing, the architects profession ought to be defined by its sphere of knowledge. Technical, esthetical and economical knowledge about buildings, environments in whole and parts combined with understanding of the conditions required for their creation should form the common base that defines the profession. The application of that knowledge in design, management, public or private administration, research, education, construction etc. should be the superstructure. The creation, management and preservation of an architecture, with a quality that discriminates it from the mere construction or development, requires professionals whose activities are based on and supported by knowledge.

Bengt Ahlqvist är privatpraktiserande arkitekt i Stockholm. Han har tidigare haft ett nära samarbete med Ralph Erskine, men driver numera en egen verksamhet.