

This text was put down in one stream of thought, after ruminating on a teaching session with our graduates. We are still learning.

Last Wednesday lunch time, sitting around a table in meeting room one, we had a difficult and somewhat emotional time during a design review with our three new graduates, their three mentors and the winner of last years bursary, Andre. We are three weeks into a small design competition, namely Campus Unlimited for a community school in Christchurch, New Zealand. I introduced a mini competition to the internship programme about three years ago. We have tackled a manifesto in Haiti for the rebuilding of the country after its devastation in 2010. Also, a strategy for using discarded mattresses, and the design of a vertical farm in Potters Fields. This years cohort have a lot to live up to in light of the last three projects, which have all been short listed in their respective competitions.

So this mini competition is the precursor to the major competition in which the students will compete with other design teams from around the world of Architecture. Our three young architects had started off slowly. None of them had grasped the notion of team work and still carried with them a naivety that architecture was merely about creating a beautiful image rather than an architectural narrative that responded to the brief that culminated in a beautiful image. We had arranged for the group to go to see Robert Thum at East London University the following week to get his diploma students to join in the discussion we had generated around architecture and education. I have occasionally been a guest critic on the diploma unit and Robert and I are trying to forge greater links between the school and practice. Alas, the project had not reached a stage in which the right level of feed back would emerge from this exercise. We would leave it for some other time.

Shortly after the crit, Anniek, the winner of the Bursary three years ago sent an email.

It read “I feel we have overwhelmed (frightened the student)”, and conclude that “maybe we should give them back a bit of control, confidence Let them talk and we listen. See what happens.”

This feed back, in itself, was encouraging, as the three mentors were all learning after being part of the programme and now acting as architectural educators in their own right. Alasdair had been an early entrant to the programme and now a fully qualified architect Rachel and Anniek were part way through their Part Three and Andre, an obvious future talent, feeling his way into the process.

I had looked upon them all and felt hugely satisfied that after ten years of running this programme a paradigm shift was taking place with youth and creativity emerging in our work.

My response to Aniek had to be carefully considered. I hoped it conveyed my many experiences. It was delivered at a critical moment in the pedagogical process. I had seen this on many occasions. It drew on years of my involvement and leadership of the programme.

The fourteen years I had spent in practice since starting as a very nervous young man, landing in the fortunate position as an assistant architect on the GSK HQ and seeing a project taken from concept to completion with the added bonus of being in a site based office along with all the other consultants and contractors.

My words reflected on the time between 1996 and 1998 when I did my diploma and studied simultaneously an MSc with Paul Coates at UeL. When the research we carried out in computing and architecture was on the periphery of design theory. It is now main stream and has been high jacked somewhat by the software giants and other economic forces that often drive out critical thinking and appropriate what it deems useful to this business we call architecture.

I pondered on the lost hours, building genetic algorithms, glued to a screen watching these in-silico worlds come to life, with only half a dozen lines of computer code. Remembering the words Alexandra Paolo said on the final crit that “if you sincerely believe its architecture, then I do too.”

The sentiment of my response pulled on the 12 years of professional model making. The chance encounter with Gerry Judah that led to working on film and video productions, the anti fur campaign shot by David Bailey, Aswad album covers, Duran Duran videos, architectural and exhibition models for Stirling, Foster and Rogers, for their proposal along the Thames, all-nighters with Richard on my shoulder and his young entourage eagerly hanging on his every word, being part of the first YAYA in 93 and falling out with Simon Conder, who refused to pay up because I had been in an almost fatal cycle accident, building a wooden replica of a car designed by Corbusier and a full size version of one of Leonardo's flying machines.

The degree I did at Westminster University in two years, not three, because I could not get a full grant. The successes I had in some design units and terrible ones I had in others. The joy of realising that I had an ability to write after many years and fears of dyslexia.

The experience of survival after closing down a record business that had consumed three years of my life and broken a friendship because we lacked a business plan and partnership agreement, that may have rescued a good enterprise and survived the ravages of the early 1990s recession.

Calling on the three years working in the health sector, caring and teaching people with sever learning difficulties in my radical years and becoming one of the youngest union shop stewards in NUPE during the Nurses Strike in the early 80s.

And leaving school at the age of 16 with a poor set of GCSE's but the tenacity to go through an apprenticeship in mechanical engineering. Trekking to night school and working Saturdays to make up the time for my Thursday day release that eventually gained me the necessary qualifications to get into the BSc at Lanchester Polytechnic.

My response to Anniek was this.

“Learning is a complex thing. We, as architects in practice, often lose this skill. The internship programme allows us to have our own unit inside a practice. Now that you have come through this programme, you, Al, Rachel and Andre are on your way to playing an important role in this evolutionary process. But it's a two way street. You teach me and I teach you. And most importantly, we must be allowed to fail but given the confidence to succeed.”

I didn't need to recount the life story. Some of my colleagues know my background, others not. They know that I am a bit of a maverick in the practice. They know my role in the Urban Studio. They know my work. Ten years on from winning a masterplan in Liverpool and delivering the first five buildings. They know my reputation has a hard working and ferociously honest professional whose main focus is on the project.

I concluded my email with the following

“What we should encourage is a team approach that negotiates a resolution to a complex brief. We should support everyone in order to produce a work that conveys a robust architectural solution to a humanitarian need. If we can do that without speaking, let us try. “

We issued the competition entry a fortnight later. We got the runners up prize. The certificate is on my wall. 7

Post Script

The weeks after leaving the old firm I was contacted by another intern I had mentored who now had his own unit at the Bartlett School of Architecture in central London. He invited me to guest critique his students. There I met a young architect by the name of Krassi. We got on well. He invited me to do the same at his University. If all goes well we will go to the Dessau Institute of Architecture, the Bauhaus. Reading that Johannes Itten book 30 years ago might just come in useful after all.