



In 1972, after a deep institutional crisis, the Architectural Association had to confront another difficulty, this time financial. The Secretary for Education, Margaret Thatcher, relieved the Local Education Authorities of their obligation to give grants to British students intending to attend the AA. However, Alvin Boyarsky, the newly elected Chairman, saw in this crisis the opportunity to reinvent the performance of the school. His future plans for the AA included an increase in: the volume of media produced by the school, the number of international staff and visitors, the number of international students, and the fees they paid.

For years, a major element of the teaching at the AA was what Boyarsky called its 'cosmopolitanism': week after week, foreign architects, students and teachers circulated freely through the establishment, getting involved in juries and seminars. These migration movements were clearly a main contribution to the "new" international AA, however, these flows of people within the premises could be read not as a deliberate decision but as an inevitable consequence related to a series of external events. In 1973, another episode that promoted internationalism within the AA's foreign policies was the integration of Britain in the European Economic Community, endorsing a stronger relationship between the UK and Europe.

In this context, and in 1972 as well, Elia Zenghelis and Rem Koolhaas, tutor and student of Diploma Unit 9 at the AA, together with Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis, all four founders of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, produced their famous "Exodus or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture". This project is probably the clearest example when it comes to explaining the Unit's pedagogical approach. Since its beginnings, the idea of reality proved to be problematic for the Unit's master Zenghelis. Paraphrasing the Unit's brief from the first AA Prospectus of 1973, reality is the professional life, loaded with confusion and pressure, that depends on particular historical moments. By deliberately removing themselves from present reality, current issues, and social problems the Unit's intention was to encourage students to react to a brief with a strong architectural language that positioned themselves ideologically. Once they left behind the terrain of the 'real' they could enter into the realm of the possible in order to speculate on the future of architecture in ideal terms.

However, the 'real' started entering the realm of education as the professional practice of the staff began to filter into the pedagogical model. Alongside with 'ideal' projects that worked as a manifesto for what architecture should be, like for instance the well-known *Malevich's Tektonik*, the Unit started producing projects for competitions in which OMA was also taking part, like the *Roosevelt Island Housing Competition* of 1974.

In 1976, there was one main shift in the Unit's process of production. In previous years, the 'real' and the 'ideal' worked as two poles to react to and thus produce works in two different manners, one more practical and one more theoretical. Now the relationship between the two changed and a progression from one into the other was established. The Unit announced its intentions to work on "the spectrum from 'theoretical' to 'real'".

First, research would be developed in order to produce architectural theorems, through evident operative historical distortions, that could then be put into practice directly in the design projects. The intention was to give a critical attitude to real projects that stemmed from a theoretical framework.

Keeping in mind that the Unit and OMA were working closely in parallel, sometimes overlapping and operating simultaneously, the spectrum from theoretical to real was pushed to its most actual consequences, with students/workers designing with/for a tutor/boss. The spectrum actually goes from one site of ideal and theoretical production – the school of architecture – to the realm of real and pragmatic production of architecture – the professional practice. While the Unit aimed to engage with 'the real world', it was not to be achieved by means of developing feasible projects, working with social and political struggles, nor drawing construction details. Rather, the exchange between pedagogical and professional practices rooted the Unit in the real practice of architecture. The Unit/Office moved freely through the length of the spectrum in both directions and made instrumental its production from the Unit to the Office and from practice to education. Competitions were one of the fundamental external professional tools that was introduced to the agenda of the Unit, like the competition for the Dutch Parliament extension, still considered to be OMA's first project, and also a project that some Unit students took part in.

Almost 45 years later, the United Kingdom is about to leave the European Union and new changes in the school are about to happen. The AA community will once again have the opportunity to ask itself: What's next? How do we want architecture education to be? With this particular case we learn that, in the spectrum, attitudes go from autonomy to instrumentality: from the most detached and resistant to the most engaged and committed kind of practice, what is at stake is the agency of the architect and our engagement with reality. The idea of the spectrum is to remind us of the possibilities of our education, the paths we have already tried and the ones still to be tested. Can we envision an architectural practice, both pedagogical and professional, that can fully affect and be affected by reality? Being apparently the only working models, can we rethink the Unit and the Office?

One thing is certain: in a time where narrow-minded and neoconservative approaches keep growing stronger, we will more than ever need critical and imaginative thinking to put into action original productive educational models, hand in hand with innovative roles for architects. ♥



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