

THE AA's PERCEPTION OF ITSELF

'If you think yourself to be the Best you can become the Best.' There are a number of institutions for which this has been a healthy attitude: including the AA School at many periods of its existence. Especially with the amazing 'kick start' of its history. Such an attitude can also act as an incentive for a new incumbent or Director, though requiring a true and deep belief in the POSSIBLE: not pie in the sky. School communities have a horrible habit of sussing-out the incoming braggart who, when in place, *does NOT deliver*, and they can respond mercilessly – with full justification.

Folkloric reputations are amongst the most irritating: justifiable belief in the QUALITY or DYNAMIC or ORIGINALITY of a process or Institution has to be earned. This then *has to be read and re-read* against the culture and economics of the day. In this sense THE AA IS GREATLY AT RISK. For years and years it could be said 'the AA is the best School in England/Europe/the English – speaking world... or even 'The World.' At certain periods this was so.

Yet few people will dare tell you, that for some time, this is not really the perception from the outside world. Visiting lecturers, jurors, other heads of schools, deans and the ambitious, will acknowledge its atmosphere, its ambience, its very good administrative machine but will readily move on elsewhere where there are places with a more dynamic trajectory/ are more genuinely innovative/ have a better level of AVERAGE or TYPICAL student – not just a few *specials*.

Furthermore, the cat is now out of the bag: it has become easier to get into the AA. It was the irritating old throwaway line that if you have the cash you can get in - fairly easily refuted. But now repeated evidence shows that the line might be true. I have an extensive network of students from all parts of Europe and Asia and am frequently being told that they were surprised that a classmate, from their school – much further down the pecking order has (surprisingly?) got a place in the AA! I can in fact, even point to some such who have passed through our own Studio.

Attempting to desist from comparisons with the Bartlett, I have to report that currently, the 35 available slots there for new 4th Years are being competed for by almost 1000 students internationally. (The interviewing machine there is working overtime.) Thus, with the occasional mistake – or foregoing of real talent – you DO get a frighteningly high general level of intellect that is capable of creative and INDEPENDENT thinking and interesting tutorial challenge.

In the light of this, it seems to have been the policy for some time – to produce an 'AA type,' amusing, aware of 'strategies,' au fait with good places to eat and talk from all parts of the Globe. Enjoying its 'style,' whilst (not all of them) quite absorbing its theoretical 'edge.'

Well – I've got news for you: it is at last wearing thin – VERY, VERY THIN. It might carry you another 10 years or so: then the Ostrich, with its head in the sand, will be exhumed with an ossified head. Like the London Gentlemen's Clubs, Freemasonry, Prince Charles, the joys of Margate or Biarritz – it has more myth and nostalgia than substance.

THE ARMANI SUIT

You know and I know that people will buy an Armani suit *because it is an Armani Suit*. They ignore a palpably better suit down the street. The AA School thrives on the same psychology: as have the parents of many of its students. They don't check out the work, or

the programme. This year's elegantly produced Projects Review is strong on interesting-looking groups of people doing, well, it seems *something*. But it is relatively thin on actual original-looking stuff. Maybe because Brett Steele has laid emphasis on 'strategies' rather than design in the Diploma School. He wanted the AA to be 'leaders,' but we live in a more harsh survival dynamic where ability to think 'out of the box' and be fleet of foot counts more than incanting borrowed ideas.

As reported by many, the School Show, once you get past the strawberries, has obviously been done on the cheap, and for those who have reasonably good memories – or the energy to walk seven blocks North and compare -- it is sad. The cynicism behind the display and its obvious under-funding does the School no good in the London or British context, and more importantly offers a poor reward to those staff and students who have really put a lot of effort into their year. Yet maybe, Brett, as a good marketing man had the right attitude – like the Armani suit, the foreign punters will buy into the product anyhow. AA Alumni and the International Set will leap off the plane, give a glance at the Show and be nostalgic or do the 'hellos' – Austrian – style, so no worries !

How often do I meet someone's mother who says 'my daughter has just been accepted by School 'X' – it's a good School – Isn't it?' If you don't want to be totally dishonest, you say 'not a bad place!' What you daren't say is 'actually it's ranked number 33, going downhill and has lost its Mojo.' If you do... you get back 'but it's very good *really* isn't it?' Nowadays I feel like that when meeting old AA Alumni around the world or those who have always admired it. *'The AA's Great, really, isn't it?'* It often makes me very sad, and embarrassed.

I FEAR THAT THE AA COMMUNITY IS IN A FORM OF DENIAL, or collective, protective self-delusion. THUS ITS CHOICE OF HEAD, AT THIS MOMENT IN TIME, IS **CRITICAL**...WITH CERTAINLY NO CAUSE FOR DIVING BACK INTO A SELF-CONGRATULATORY COMFORT-ZONE.

WE FEEL BETTER WITH AN INTERNAL APPOINTMENT

Let's come to the point. An internal appointment will be the Kiss of Death. Let's be frank: the only teachers with an international credibility are Pier Vittorio Aureli (the Ungers Revivalist, of the Dogmatic persuasion) and the Madrid duo: Cristina Diaz Moreno/Efrén Grinda. The rest, may well contain some amazing *potential* but do not yet make many great waves out there.

Yet the constant rumours coming out of the AA suggest that the institution is preparing itself – indeed, almost *willing* itself – to bed down with a familiar face. Think about it, the great directors of the past...William Lethaby, Alvin Boyarsky... or even the pretty effective (though personally flawed), such as Michael Patrick or Mohsen Mostafavi, would perhaps never have made it in such circumstances.

In the event the present feebleness does the place no credit. It is well known both Inside and to the informed Outside... that two or three characters are obviously positioning themselves. One apparently, is going around telling everybody that he can do an amazing job, running the place: another is going around being nice to everybody. Another has very cleverly maneuvered into a position that could quite easily – almost by default – ease this person into the Chair.

This is simply not good enough. Like Mrs. May

and BREXIT, it suggests a blindfolded and doggedly introvert approach that puts internal tactic above external realities.

Like the UK, the AA is dangerously nearer to the end of the road than it wants to admit. The feebleness of an internal appointment will, however, not be lost on those who have to invest in the future.

AN ATTACK ON AN INSTITUTION FROM WITHOUT

When I went to the Bartlett the perceived wisdom was especially in the voices of the British Schools 'Oh well, the AA can do all *that* because it is a private school.' Yet the history of the Modern Bartlett suggests otherwise.

In one year I had completely revised the timetable, brought in 20 new tutors (eight stolen from the AA, including the phenomenal Frosso Pimenides). Unashamedly borrowed the Unit system. Dusted down the existing good talent, used some Boyarsky techniques to challenge, corner – and ultimately clear the place of some appalling misogynists, nutters and time-servers (many of whom wished they were back in Cambridge!). I deliberately ignored whether they had six kids, a wooden leg or a cute motorbike. I copied Boyarsky in many other ways (in years since, Bernard Tschumi and I have pondered – as I have with Leon van Schaik – that we three were Alvin Boyarsky's secret Master Class in how to re-create a school. I am not suggesting that he held all the answers, but **NOTE THIS** that it is an almost full time job, requiring wit, Killer Instinct and the ability to harness controllable paranoia, plus the ability to quickly put out bushfires.

In our then office, Christine Hawley once said something very wise, 'if you run a School, you've got to be willing to support openly some people who are on board, but you wouldn't want to have supper with.' Few heads can bring themselves to do that. You are surely looking for such a person, which is NOT the same as a feeble 'agree with everybody' type. There is a subtle, but perceptible difference.

Remember – AN INTERNAL APPOINTMENT IS A COP-OUT.

FACING THE NEW DIRECTOR: RECENT TRENDS – INSIDE AND OUT

Brett Steele has moved the school toward what I would call, the 'American' model: polite, well organised, with predominantly 'on the move' ambitious staff who, as in the American way, spend much of their energies *defining their own position*. (The Post-Tschumi 'Columbia Syndrome'). Then insisting on cohesion of objectives within the Unit. There are of course one or two magnificent exceptions, but the more 'American' style proponents find it works fine with such acquiescent students.

Surprisingly too I have found in observing some big offices here and in Australia and the USA, that recent AA Graduates are remarkably 'corporate' in that Ivy League way of saying the right thing at the right time. Whatever happened to those picky, witty, contentious, interesting, resourceful, *identifiable* AA types? Did they die out? Is it *entirely* a generational shift, or is the life-stream actually still alive and well but living seven blocks up the road?

A certain anodyne quality that even Mohsen Mostafavi eschewed is the product of a director who was brilliant at real-estate operations (or so we are

led to believe, gives 'American Dean' lecture introductions that sound smooth and well-informed but, somehow, fail to remain in the memory for more than 5 minutes – and then buggers-off after the first 10 minutes, anyhow. (Remember, he was for 2 years, my student). He will be brilliant running galleries and theatres at UCLA. The dependence on so many East Coast USA Examiners also reinforces this 'Correct', unimaginative situation.

The new incumbent MUST of necessity recalibrate, think anew and return to a new, dynamic, fearless, inventive direction. Of course not any way that I would do it – in fact, better something really new, of now, of the necessarily 'Survivalist' world. A major task will also be to technologically bring the place back up to speed. Perhaps trade off one or two of those houses for some robotics or decent computers – at least.

His or her challenge will also be to 'up' the quality of the intake. The hardest task of all.

DEGREES, VISAS AND THE FUTURE

I have also described the fact that a degree giving Institution need not inhibit the most arcane, original, dizzy, even reactionary (ugh!) work. You just have to USE it intelligently. Of course a few Luddite AA Romantics hate such things as University Degrees, well, they had better wake up and join the Real World.

I have no doubt that the Punters think otherwise. They need to get jobs, grants, office promotion, something on paper that is constantly being 'explained.' What's wrong with an MARCH, for goodness sake!

Some of my young AA friends and recent graduates are having to leave the country, before those from other schools: because of this situation. Remember, these are currently your PRIME PUNTERS, word is already getting round, not very healthy for recruiting I would have thought? Skilfully Brett left the stage before the shit really hit the fan.

Of necessity, your Chosen Person will have this task at the TOP of the Agenda.

If we love the AA, if even, the Bartlett *really* needs to be challenged – and it does, if we still have some faith in London as an architectural Powerhouse – and we do, we ALL need a Great AA School. Not a Swiss Finishing School. Not a pale imitation (with chandelier and London address) of an Ivy League School.

Observe SCI ARC – founded by Ray Kappe as the 'AA of the West.' Now in one of its best periods, with its FIFTH DIRECTOR all *DESIGNER ARCHITECTS.... look, Ray Kappe, Michael Rotondi, Neil Denari, Eric Owen Moss and now.....Hernan Diaz Alonso!*

A serious Powerhouse...and really buzzing these days.

Such issues should certainly colour your Choice.

NOTES RE THE PANEL

I note that unlike your competitors, SCI-ARC, Bartlett or Vienna's Angewende Kunst there is no Senior architectural academic or notable architect on the Panel. With both Professor David Porter, Professor Christine Hawley and Professor Robert Mull on Council, I do not find this reassuring. I was myself headhunted by James Gowen – brought in to be the External Advisor. In more recent times both the Bartlett and Sci-Arc brought in Thom Mayne as the External Advisor. In all cases, they had direct mandate to recommend the appointments this, of course helped.

Thank you for the opportunity to pass on these views. Please treat them seriously and with care. ♥