ANYTHING GOES: BEYOND DEFINING WHAT A GOOD SCHOOL IS

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Introduction

The title of this paper refers to Paul Feyerabend's book *Against Method* (1974). Feyerabend – a critical disciple of the philosopher Karl Popper – argued that following any strict method in science restricts the path of progress. His famous dictum that "anything goes" is not a recommendation to act irresponsibly, but is – in his own words – "the terrified exclamation of a rationalist who takes a closer look at history". Feyerabend's idea can be transferred from the history of science to the question of how to create educational facilities that serve the "real needs" of users. The author will argue that quality criteria are an important input for design because they can stimulate discussion about the wants and needs of users, but that these criteria have to be defined and used in a way that allows them to evolve during the design process, potentially presenting us with an entirely different set of criteria at the end of the process. Regarding architecture as a process of designing the problem as much as designing the solution helps us to create highly specific objects inspired by local context and conditions. To avoid the negative side effect of this approach – the danger of solutions that are over-specific and rapidly outdated – design has to be viewed as a process spanning the whole life-cycle of a building, including maintenance and continuous redesign. This approach also calls for solutions that can be adapted over time, thus offering aesthetics of change profit, not suffer, from adaptation.

Designing without intentions

In 1943, a new building for radiation research was opened at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the United States. The building was an artefact of wartime haste. Designed in an afternoon by MIT graduate Don Whinston, it was ready for occupation six months later. A completely utilitarian structure, it was framed with heavy wood timbers due to the unavailability of steel in wartime. The building was exempted from fire-code regulations because it was classified as a temporary structure. It was one of the strongest buildings on campus, bearing 700 kg per square metre. With its dark central corridors and completely repetitive plan and façade, the building lacked any architectural ambitions. Numbered like the other buildings on MIT campus, it was referred to as Building 20. Although conceived as a temporary structure, Building 20 remained in use for over 50 years. In 2004, it was replaced by the Stata Center, a new complex for computer, information and intelligence sciences designed by Frank Gehry and named after its main donor.

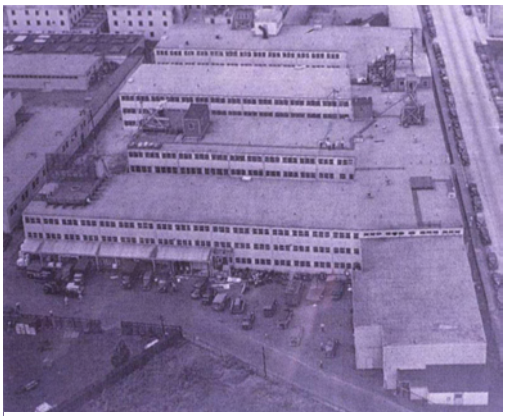

Chart. MIT Building 20 (Photo by MIT)

In spite of its appearance, when Building 20 celebrated its 25th birthday in 1978, it was one of the most prized buildings on the campus partly due to its history of housing important breakthroughs in research. But the building was revered by its users for other reasons; in the opinion of one user "it is the best research building ever designed". In *How Buildings Learn* (1995), Stewart Brand quotes one user who appreciated the "possibility to design our own space. If you don't like a wall, you just put your elbow through it". Users also felt responsible for the buildings' appearance: "If you make a hole in the floor to get more vertical space, you just do it without asking…This is really our place. We have designed it, we run it. The building is full of micro-environments, each one a creative space of its own. It has so much personality".

Evidently, the designer's intentions had little relationship with the success of Building 20. Don Whinston certainly did not intend to create a great research building. He probably dreamed of designing a "real" facility with "real" qualities *after* the temporary structure had been dismantled a few years henceforth. But the very provisional character of the building invited users to create their own, continuously evolving environment by incremental change. Thus, users developed a feeling of responsibility for their environment that was not delegated to external experts for design and maintenance.

In planning the new Stata Center to replace Building 20, MIT's administration was aware of the valued status of the old building and promised to revive its spirit in the new design. Unfortunately, in the opinion of the author, although its shapes could be regarded as a metaphor for movement and change, it is difficult to imagine future users regarding the building as a structure that they themselves shaped. The new building, parts of which were named after its sponsors – the Bill Gates Tower and the W-shaped Gates Entrance for sponsor William and Windows –, resembles a monument. Although it is admired for its striking exterior and architectural daring, the building has also been criticised for its insensitivity to the needs of its inhabitants, its poor design for daily use and its high cost at USD 283.5 million.

No-architecture

What can we learn from the story of Building 20? One lesson is that success is not necessarily a question of good intentions. As both human beings and built structures have a considerable ability to adapt, a good story and luck contribute to subjective contentment as much as architectural design. Can we conclude that Building 20 is just a bizarre example, a singular exception that proves the general rule that we must carefully analyse users' needs, transform them into a brief and then find the best architectural solutions? Not in the opinion of the author. The history of modern architecture shows that architects have questioned this rational model of design at least since the 1960s, when the side-effects of utilitarian functionalism became evident on the levels of town-planning and individual buildings. The British architect Cedric Price, who referred to himself as an anti-architect, was one of the foremost figures in promoting an architecture of open-endedness and change. In his 1965 "Potteries Thinkbelt" project, he proposed using the railway system around Newcastle to create a new learning environment, providing shared areas for industry and faculty linked by university facilities on the move. "Potteries Thinkbelt" envisioned a kind of circuit, or network, with mobile classrooms and laboratories using the existing rail lines to move from place to place, from housing to library to factory to computer centre. Price did not provide a well defined solution for the task; merely an organisational proposition that would itself become a medium for exploring the users' need.

Stata Center (Photo by Wikimedia, Marc Pellegrini)

While Price based his design on existing and even decaying infrastructure, the idea of a dynamic architecture, which was advocated by architects like the ARCHIGRAM group and the Japanese "Metabolists" in the 1960s, was founded on the idea of unlimited energy resources in a technological utopia. In the 1970s, this movement was replaced by the ideologies of the building industry, which provided various competing systems of modular architecture in order to deal with rising demand, especially in the fields of education and science. For the most part, these buildings were as neutral and void of qualities in terms of space and form as Building 20, but they did not enjoy Building 20's success. The Free University in Berlin, designed by Candilis, Josic and Woods, is one of this movement's most prominent failures. The building won a competition in 1963, and the first building stage was completed in 1973. The building offered a network of spacious corridors designed to encourage encounters between its users and a steel

construction that promised easy adaptability. The building soon became infamous for leaking and overheating during summer, and the corridors never developed from movement spaces to meeting places. Other school buildings underwent similar architectural experimentation, resulting in the creation of open spaces with pre-fabricated elements that were intended to facilitate team-teaching and flexible learning. However, as a result of acoustic problems and inflexible pedagogical practices, open spaces were soon divided into individual classrooms that were often of inferior quality to those found in conventional schools.

Such experiences with adaptable architecture in the 1970s have left many administrative bodies responsible for educational buildings (at least in Germany and Austria) wary of an open architecture. The ensuing dilemma is this. Even if we appreciate the idea of an *unintentional* architecture that leaves ample flexibility for users' future actions, it is very difficult to create this *intentionally*. If architects are involved, users expect them to deliver. Placing a neutral structure at their disposition is not sufficient.

Form follows process

A possible solution to this dilemma is a radical shift from form to process. The various stakeholders in financing, designing, maintaining, operating and using educational buildings must enter into a new relationship that regards architecture as a medium to explore mutual interests and to negotiate often conflicting demands. As these stakeholders rely on highly idiosyncratic and self-contained systems of operation, the best we can achieve is – in the terminology of systems theory – a mutual "irritation" of these systems that may lead to improved performance. "Irritation", one of the words profoundly disliked by administration and finance departments, thus achieves a positive meaning[1].

The definition of quality criteria has to become part of this overall process. Quality criteria are an important input for design, setting the scene for the discussion about that wants of users. But if we take the focus on process seriously, criteria have to evolve continuously, potentially presenting us with an entirely different set of criteria in the end than at the beginning of a design. Regarding architecture as a process of designing the problem as much as designing the solution allows us to create highly specific objects inspired by local context, specific conditions and fortunate circumstances. Process orientation includes the willingness to abandon all good intentions for a singular opportunity that suddenly reveals itself. If we really want to design schools for the future we should accept that any definition of a good school is merely a hypothesis that can always be replaced by a more appropriate proposition in a specific situation. The international community has an important role in setting standards in a way that does not damage but strengthen the self-confidence of users in their ability to shape their environment.

Note

1. *cf.* Pascale, R.T., M. Milleman and L. Gioja (2001), *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*, Three Rivers Press.

References

Brand, S. (1995), *How Buildings Learn*, Penguin Books.

Feyerabend, P. (1974), *Anything Goes*, Verso.