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Bruce James Abbey

Bruce Abbey became Dean of the Syracuse University School of Architecture on July 1. He comes to Syracuse from the University of Virginia, where he was Professor, Chair of the Architecture Department and, most recently, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. Prior to moving to Charlottesville, he worked for Dan Kiley, Michael Graves, and Robert Geddes. Between earning his first professional degree at Cornell in 1966 and his second from Princeton in 1971, he served in the Peace Corps, working on restoration of historic structures in Tunisia. Bruce Abbey, who has long taught architectural design, is particularly interested in architectural criticism and urban design. Representative work by Dean Abbey was shown recently at our School of Architecture Gallery. It has been widely shown elsewhere, by institutions such as the National Academy of Design in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. For four years he served on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Architectural Education* and was a member of the Architectural Advisory Board of the Princeton University School of Architecture.

Syracuse University
School of Architecture

N E W S L E T T E R

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Bruce James Abbey

Inaugural Address of Dean Abbey

I wish to convey to you my pleasure at becoming the new dean of architecture at Syracuse. It is a singular honor and a great privilege to be asked to head a school of architecture that is so well-established as is this one. The reputation of the school has attained great heights in the past fourteen years, under the guidance of my predecessor, Werner Seligmann, and with the extraordinary efforts of this very talented faculty -and it was because of that reputation for excellence that I was attracted to Syracuse.

In my former capacity as Chairman of the Division of Architecture at the University of Virginia, I was in a position to hire both former students and faculty of Syracuse as teachers and therefore was well acquainted with the high quality of the program, its faculty and its graduates. Consequently, I am keenly aware of the great responsibility I have for the stewardship of the school over the next few years, and I pledge to you my efforts, good will and most importantly my sense of humor as we move towards the twenty-first century.

I would like to take this opportunity to speak of some concerns that I have about the current "architectural scene" that affect this school and by implication any other school of architecture. I would specifically like to touch briefly on such issues as pluralism, originality and authenticity as they may impact on the discourse in our particular "academy of architecture."

We are being told by some critics that we as a profession are yet again in a state of crisis. In truth we seem to be constantly in a state of crisis. Indeed, since the beginning of the period of the Enlightenment the assumptions regarding the sources and validity of "truths" in different fields of knowledge have been constantly challenged, often producing bitter debate with unforeseen consequences. Social, political and artistic theory have been in constant evolution, even to the point that sometimes the old becomes the new and vice versa. Witness the rise of capitalism with the failure of the communist economic system or the rise of neoclassicism in the arts. Contradictions abound. I believe it was Manfredo Tafuri who said that it was the role of the historian to expose the "contradictions" of history. I am not sure even he would be comfortable with the current turn of events!

The role of the architect as professional continues to evolve. While we have greatly expanded our knowledge base, we are more than ever unsure as to how to define ourselves -or even if it is within our power to do so. We have evolved from that of the master mason, to guild member, to artistic genius, to professional, to artistic bohemian, to the modernist social critic, to facade maker and manipulator of symbolic images for commercial

consumption. Today we probably think of ourselves as having to fulfill a bit of all of these roles. Given the range of these personae, it is no wonder that architecture has suffered its share of delusions and disappointments over the past 250 years!

As a result, at the close of the twentieth century I find, as many of you no doubt may, that the world of architecture is a difficult one to comprehend in its entirety. And, therefore, it is a world that is increasingly difficult to teach, or in which to practice. We are not only living in a increasingly pluralist cultural condition, we are having great difficulty understanding each other, given the very ambiguity of verbal and formal language itself. The isms multiply and we are left with options that range from total withdrawal into private and often nihilistic explorations, or, at the other extreme, a complete capitulation to the often mind-numbing repetition of commercial practice.

Yet I remain hopeful. Primarily because creativity itself is an act of optimism and we are by definition creative beings. Moreover, as architects, we are still those charged with the specific responsibility to give form and expression to the physical, man-made environment. As the ever-quotable Aldo van Eyke says, "Architecture is built meaning, so get close to the meaning and build." By this I think he means that we invest into everything that we do a value or meaning; either as individuals or as a society -and most often both. Therefore the study and practice of architecture must not only teach how to build but what to build. This identification of issues on which we can come to collective agreement allows for a body of knowledge to be transmitted from one generation to the next.

And we have the tangible history of our architectural past to guide, inform and inspire us. There exists no other profession with this kind of "baggage" or collective memory. A "baggage" that is rich for what it tells us about our past but also has the miraculous capability to sustain reinterpretation and refinement. For without our past as a culture we have no memory and without memory we have no sense of purpose or hope for the future except for the most banal forms of self-gratification. Architecture, therefore, is about life itself. To build is a fundamental human activity; to be an architect is to be a part of the human experience. We can and do make "history" by our speculations and our constructions. We do count and we have much to offer.

A major dilemma for all of us today is the emphasis placed upon originality by our society. There is the belief that the only authentic act is an original act, and it is only the original act that merits interest, publication, and critical acclaim. Unfortunately, creating a sustaining architectural culture, or building a useable and coherent urban environment, cannot be maintained by building only unique personal visions, no matter how interesting the individual ideas may be.

At the foundation of the Academy of Architecture in 1665, Blondel clearly stated that the purpose of the Academy was to establish the principles of good design based upon those foremost in the profession. As *The Charlottesville Tapes* revealed, there exists a profusion of idiosyncratic and often bankrupt formal systems by our so called leading architects that has led to a total lack of communal professional values -particularly as regards the nature of the city.

Yet what about our pluralist culture? It is indeed a fact. How do we respond to this condition?

There are currently several understandings of the word pluralism. The first, and for me the most relevant, is that put forth by Peter Carl in the early seventies, where he stated that pluralism argues against an aesthetic that adopts a singular point of view. He writes: "It is an assumption of the pluralist ethic that experience is cumulative, existence multifocal: that man sees himself as an actor in many simultaneous plays and is probably incapable of a singular description of his world and therefore himself." For me this implies that we need an architecture that is inclusive, rich, knowledgeable and not one that is uninformed and exclusive. The other pluralism - that of equal but separate- does not interest me, as much. Not all values are of equal importance. Truth is not relative. Some things we do know.

Although current forms of pluralism argue against the need to accommodate majority tastes and sensibilities as in classical ideals, there is, I feel, a need for convention in order to establish

a shared narrative. Otherwise, how do we proceed? It is the new juxtaposition of known themes and associations that allows for creative re-interpretations and discovery. This is, in my mind, the source of originality and ultimately authenticity. Authenticity is found in the the purpose and the relevance of the choices made.

I see history as a source of themes and of ideas that undergoes constant transformation. As teachers and professionals we are caught between defining ideas of excellence (a classical value system) and that of being original. Authenticity on the other hand is a problem of relevance and legitimacy and should not be confused with originality. As stated earlier, originality as a value or goal may not be even useful or valuable -particularly within the academy.

Creative authenticity, therefore, occurs somewhere between a self-conscious critical act and the positing of a rational, *a priori* theoretical position. Invention, or "effective surprise," in the words of Jerome Bruner, is that which presents, or if you like, that which re-presents experience or ideas in ways not yet seen.

So where are we? Where will we go?

In the past, schools of architecture have been founded on a craft, technical, or a fine arts/design-oriented base. Sometimes, at critical junctures, some combination of the aforementioned categories has occurred to produce schools of singular repute. The School of Architecture at Syracuse has indeed forged a relationship in the past few years between the commodity of technical competence and that of design excellence. It would be my hope that the future allows for a third part of the triad to come more forcefully into being. That part would be a sound and rich intellectual experience that allows and stimulates creative relevance well beyond the short years that one is in school.

Not that it is not already going on at present. Of course it is.

But my vision for the School is to develop further the modes of critical inquiry that support the relevant creative inventions in the studio. As a School we need to pose the correct questions as well as attempt to produce some answers. However, the questions may well be more important at this time, as we have absorbed most of the current dogma and have found it wanting. This School of Architecture, like many others, has operated within the constraints of a modernist ideology that regards abstraction and historical quotation as illegitimate bedfellows. What if, for example, this is not so? Or what happens when the typologies of the past are rendered inoperative by the complex programs of today? How do we "profess" as professors when the foundations of our pedagogical system keep shifting? What is permissible now was not in my early training. What is permissible now may well not be, in your future practice. How to keep the faith then may be one of the essential goals of the current academy. We need to believe. But above all we need to ask the right questions.

In order to promote the necessary inquiry I am pursuing several parallel courses. With the lecture series this fall we will have a group of very serious architects present their latest work -work that is done at a variety of scales and with great stylistic invention. The common thread is that they are singularly articulate about what they do and why they do it. This is architecture with a message, done with intent and great skill. In the spring we will shift to urban issues and the role of the private developer in creating urban design solutions that the public sector seems unwilling or unable to achieve. Next year we will focus on the subdisciplines of the school -Architectural History and the Technologies. I hope to have symposia and conferences to examine their roles as independent disciplines and also their relation to our profession of architecture.

We will also be publishing the work of the school. As the design studio is our particular method of critical inquiry in the university, it is important for us to share the results of that discourse.

In closing, I promise you that we will be engaged in dialogue, as a faculty, as a student body, as alumni and as a profession. The current economic situation is pressing and the effects on our profession and our school will be strongly felt in the immediate future. Nevertheless, there is much we can do, and I look forward to the challenge.