AUTHORITY AND ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION IN CHICAGO

Critical theory has been for the last several years the ascendant philosophical force in architectural education, and not least in Chicago. To the extent that critical theory has provided a theme for architectural investigation, that theme has been suspicion, the relentless questioning of all authority--a general challenge to prevailing opinion of whatever substantive content. Interestingly however, critical theorists appear willfully uncritical when it comes to the idea of authority itself. To critical theorists, authority (frequently and understandably associated with tradition) is synonymous with authoritarianism, which invariably connotes oppression, tyranny, and uniformity.

The fact that there is in English the word "authoritarian," and that it has negative connotations, underscores a genuine ambiguity about the idea of authority. It is the critical theorists, however--the ideological champions of ambiguity--who claim a single, univocal, and odious meaning for authority. But there is a poignant irony to all anti-authority ideology: to wit, its unfortunate tendency when put into practice to result in authoritarianism. For how could it be otherwise? If there is no such thing as (or no possibility of establishing) legitimate authority, then by definition all rule, all governance, will be arbitrary--i.e., authoritarian.

There is another common meaning for authority, however: leadership that is trustworthy, and that warrants obedience and respect. Thus when we say of someone that he is an authority on molecular biology, or that she is an authority on music, we are not ordinarily suggesting that these persons have proclivities toward tyranny, or insufficient reserves of imagination. On the contrary, we are saying that we can be relatively confident that their opinions regarding their particular practices are trustworthy; and implying that if we ourselves were novices in those practices, we could become more learned in them by subordinating our ignorance to their expertise and acknowledging them as mentors.

Clearly, what is being described here is not an equal power relationship. When authority is legitimate, however, both the governor and the governed, the teacher and the taught, seek the same end, viz., the advancement of the practice in which they are jointly engaged in their respective roles as master and apprentice. Moreover, it is *only* in such a context of legitimate authority that human beings can, in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, "be independent without arrogance, and…obey without servility."

Consider that all practices have histories, in the course of which are established standards of excellence that *for the moment* define the purposes and objectives of the practices themselves. In the educational context of a school, craft, or practice, the typically helpful imperative to "question authority" differs from the same (but typically less helpful) imperative in the context of critical theory. Critical theory would have authority questioned for its own sake, to undermine it for the sake of advancing the power interests of the questioner. In the context of a well ordered and functioning practice, however, authority is to be questioned in the interests of *advancing the practice itself*--questioned, in other words, not to undermine the idea of authority, but rather to make authority *more genuinely authoritative*. Admittedly, new occasions teach new duties; but far from being sclerotic and unimaginative, it is characteristic of legitimate authority that it both embodies and transmits the highest standards of a practice achieved *thus far*, and knows how to direct others to *go further* in advancing the practice.

Teachers generally, and schools of architecture in particular, are in the authority

business by definition. But legitimate authority cannot be understood apart from the purpose or purposes for which it exists, and if one of those purposes is to undermine the very idea of authority, problems are certain to follow. From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s Chicago's architectural community witnessed the consequences of a critical theory architectural curriculum at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), one purpose of which was to challenge not this or that aspect of existing architectural authority, but the idea of architectural authority itself. The many problems with the architecture program at UIC during this period have been attributed variously to the curriculum instituted by the school's former Director, Stanley Tigerman; to Tigerman's own autocratic inclinations; and to the intransigence and resentment of the tenured faculty.

Now, I hope it is clear from what has preceded that regardless of who or what is to blame for UIC's recent and current difficulties, it may be ironic but is not at all inconsistent with his program's ideological agenda that Tigerman was dismissed from his position in large part because of his alleged authoritarian management style. And while it is interesting to observe how critical theory appears to have an inherent tendency to undermine the institutional agendas of critical theorists, in the case of the UIC architecture program this is less significant than a widespread local perception that the UIC curriculum was undermining the practice of architecture. And though I would be the last person to suggest that the current standards of the architectural profession warrant uncritical allegiance, the problem endemic to critical theory is that its own internal logic prohibits it from positing or professing purposes for architecture that might enable critical theorists to authoritatively *teach* architecture. For the Chicago architectural community generally therefore, and for UIC in particular, a primary question still remains: What are the ends proper to architectural education in Chicago at the dawn of the twenty-first century?

Certainly among them, let me suggest, are the development in students of formal sensibilities and technical skills--a sense of architecture as a craft grounded in construction--that will be of some immediate use *to* the profession, and that will also provide a foundation for the skillful to advance *within* the profession. But these concerns are neither peculiar to Chicago, nor do they address the primary questions of perennial interest to Chicago architects: Given both Chicago's geography and its history up to the present, what should its architecture of the future be like, and why? To what extent should it be continuous with and / or divergent from both its own and some larger history of architecture? Or, most concisely, what kind of formal order (or orders) is best for the well being of Chicago and the other communities in its region?

A spirited and thoughtful consideration of these and other questions (not only at UIC, but also at the Illinois Institute of Technology, still the world center of Miesian modernism) is overdue, too long postponed by false or peripheral, or genuine but dislocated, concerns. For example: the "uniqueness" of Chicago's architecture; or Chicago's status as a "world class architectural city;" or even, say, an admirable concern for providing shelter for the homeless, are all concerns having little to do with the future of the Chicago region's formal order and how it should be conceived and taught in Chicago's architecture schools.

Consider several questions that seem to me of far greater import: How can Chicago transform itself--and should Chicago transform itself--from its historic self understanding as a "commercial city" into a city where commerce is understood to serve the ends of the polity rather than vice-versa? What are the formal implications of such a change in self understanding? How would such an understanding affect the content and sequence of, and the

manner in which students are asked to deal with, different building types--commercial, residential, civic--assigned in the design studio? How might the two major architecture schools in Chicago structure their curricula in such a way as to introduce such issues into the studio, and to allow for discussion and debate about architecture and the city either within or between their respective academic communities?

These are all questions about which we can expect well informed and well intentioned architects and educators to have conflicting answers. This does not mean, however, that all answers are equally true; or that the search for better answers--for trustworthy, authoritative answers, and for an academic and professional consensus about them--is necessarily futile. The internal contradictions of critical theory make apparent the necessity of some notion of legitimate authority as both a guide to the proper ends of architecture and a defense against the arbitrariness of authoritarianism in the academy. But such a notion of legitimate authority cannot simply be bureaucratic and procedural; rather it presupposes some shared and coherent vision of architecture and the city. It is time now for members of the Chicago architectural community--architects and educators--to once again contend with each other in good faith for the substance of that vision.

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