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Keynote Address and Summary Paper
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Architectural and Urban Design Education in Britain
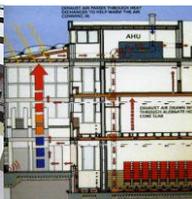
Design   Technology   Cultural Context   Communication   Management

Architectural and Urban Design Education in Britain

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National Frameworks

In order to understand what is taught in Britain, and the way that the curriculum is delivered, it is essential to know about the context in which university education operates. Within the built environment, each programme needs to be accredited by the relevant professional institute as well as validated by the university. Graduates will work with fellow professionals, and employers will recognise their professional capabilities through membership of the professional institute, alongside their academic capabilities shown by their degree and diploma. The professional institute for architecture is the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). However, vital professions such as architecture and medicine are also regulated by act of parliament. The Architects Act 1997 established the Architects Registration Board as regulator, and custodian of the Register of Architects. This is not new and replaces a similar arrangement dating back to the early 20th Century. Regardless of whether or not a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, nobody can use or practice under the title of architect in Britain, unless their name appear on the Register. There is no requirement to belong to the Royal Institute of British Architects, but it is recognised by clients and fellow professionals as the mark of an architect. Most practices consider it sufficiently important that they pay the annual subscription fee on behalf of their employees. In the latter part of the 20th Century, Government established The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education to ensure appropriate education standards in universities and colleges. Part of its brief was to produce the framework for higher education qualifications. This sets out the level for each qualification and a descriptor that identifies the required standard. In addition, the Agency turned it attention to content, and published benchmark statements for all major disciplines. So, the position is that for professional credibility, architecture programmes are visited every four years by the Royal Institute of British Architects who report on standards of student work; and accredit those programmes meeting the quality standards. As a separate exercise, the university has to submit documentation to the Architects Registration Board for its prescription. In addition, the Quality Assurance Agency periodically inspects universities to ensure that the standards of the framework for higher education qualifications and the benchmark statements are being rigorously applied. This is a complicated situation but could be simplified in practice. The Royal Institute of British Architects and the Architects Registration Board have agreed a common set of criteria, so that universities are working to the same requirements. Nevertheless, it is possible for programmes to be accredited by the Royal Institute of British Architects, and not prescribed by the Architects Registration Board and vice-versa. In addition, the benchmark statement for architecture is largely a repeat of those criteria. One suggestion for simplifying the picture is to permit the Royal Institute of British Architects to be responsible for the design education and leave admission to the profession through the professional practice examination to the Architects Registration Board.

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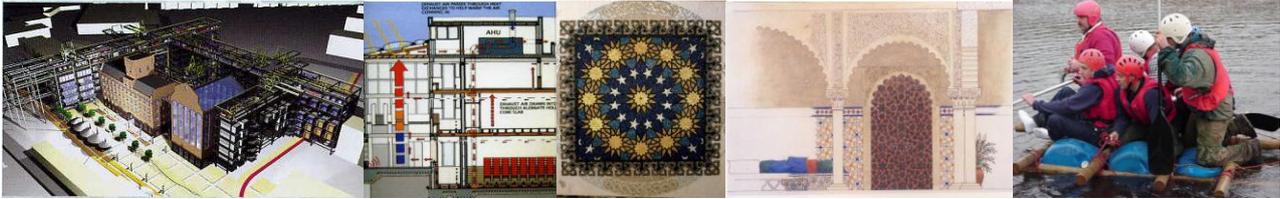
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Themes and Structure

Themes in the criteria for parts 1 and 2 of the education process are: Design; Technology and Environment; Cultural Context; Communication; Management Practice and Law. Probably because this process is about architectural education or perhaps more accurately education to become an architect – urban design is rarely mentioned in the documentation. However, all parties agree that it is an implicit part of the programmes. Part 3 is about professional practice and the criteria headings are: The Context for Practice; The Management of Architecture; The Management of Construction. Thus, part 3 is not related to design. The full-time structure of the vast majority of the forty accredited programmes in Britain is as follows:

| part 1 3 years | professional experience 1 year | part 2 2 years | professional experience 1 year | *part 3 examination* |

In nearly all cases, the part 1 courses are designated as – Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Architectural Studies, ie BA(Hons). From the middle of the 20th Century, part 2 courses were generally designated as Diploma in Architecture, ie DipArch or Bachelor of Architecture with Honours, ie BArch(Hons). In recent years, there has been a debate about the designation of part 2 courses, but for academic, regulatory and practice reasons – its level and location are quite clear. The choice in the framework for higher education qualifications is between graduate diploma and masters levels. The requirements for the former are:

i   a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline
ii an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline
iii conceptual understanding that enables the student:
    to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline; and
    to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or advanced scholarship

whereas the requirements for the latter are:

i   to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline and
ii to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques; and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses

In academic terms, it is suggested that a professional course in architecture at part 2 level more accurately reflects the first set of requirements. In regulatory terms, a masters programme is set at 180 credit points, whereas a graduate diploma is set at 240 credit points. In Britain, students in higher education should receive 120 credit points per year. It can therefore be seen that the graduate diploma is a more appropriate size for part 2. In practice, it is difficult to encourage British students to study a masters programme full time. Most masters programmes are composed of a relatively large number of overseas full time students and a smaller number of local British part time students. This is primarily for two reasons. First, British students are increasingly required to take responsibility for funding their own education. To assist this development, the Government has put a national student loan scheme in place. The scheme is available for undergraduates and those studying for graduate diplomas but it is not available to masters students. Secondly, there is

a local tax, known as the Council Tax – which all residents are required to pay. The only exceptions are undergraduates and those studying for graduate diplomas.

The Bologna Declaration called for a 3 year bachelor degree (180 ECTS) + a 2 year masters degree (120 ECTS). Britain is almost compatible with this accord, provided a liberal interpretation of masters degree is applied – that will include graduate diplomas.

Delivery

The balance of both part 1 and part 2 courses is that no weightings are given to the themes in the criteria except that Design must constitute at least half of assessed work in part 1 and part 2. The other four themes are generally taught in lectures, seminars and workshops. They occupy distinct modules in the programme and can have independent assessment strategies. The studio is a place or a set of places. There are different forms of organisation at different universities. In some universities each year of the programme will have its own studio, at others it is each course. Another pattern is that universities may prefer a vertical arrangement, with groups from different years sharing a studio. However it is organised, the principle is that every student has a permanent place in a studio where he or she will work each day, except when they are in lectures or seminars. Studio activities are known as projects. These cover the full range of architectural and urban design. In the early years, and especially at the beginning of those years, the projects take the form of small preparatory exercises; but as the students become more experienced, the projects become considerably longer and more substantive. Towards the end of each year and particularly in the degree and diploma years (third and fifth year) the students undertake one or two major projects. There will not be a time in any academic year when the students are not working on at least one project. Most importantly, there must be tangible evidence of Technology and Environment; Cultural Context; Communication; Management Practice and Law, in the design project output from each course. It should not be supposed that the criteria and themes are producing a homogeneous architectural education throughout the country. Actually, the framework enables each university to determine its own character. It is even RIBA policy that programmes should demonstrate a particular flavour, for example – Northumbria specialises in Management, Bristol in Planning, Cardiff in Technology, Sheffield Hallam in Environmental Design and so on. This has a number of advantages. First, while the general criteria must be met – there is opportunity for the students to specialise in certain areas. Secondly, the prospective students know the kind of education that they can expect from particular universities. Thirdly, the system of part 1 and part 2, enables students to change universities at the midpoint of their education. For example, a student who has experienced a programme with a strong technology base in the part 1 course, may wish to balance that with a positive arts influence in the part 2 course. Whether they change university or not, the structure enables students to learn about professional aspects during the programme as part of their studies. After the first year of professional experience, they return with a much greater maturity, and this is apparent in their part 2 design work. In addition, the simple relationship between the British modules and the European credits system, enables students from EU countries to experience a little of the education from another country and be credited with it as part of their programme. The conversion is 20 British credits = 10 ECTS.

Conclusion

It is hoped that universities in the CARDS countries will welcome the opportunity for harmonisation throughout Europe. With a wealth of tradition and history, their architectural education is no less strong than in the EU countries. If the EU pattern of education were to be generally adopted, there is no reason why graduates from CARDS countries cannot become respected professionals in any European city. Prospective employers need to be familiar with the education process of interviewees, and therefore similar patterns of structure and delivery throughout Europe can only assist understanding.

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