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Ethics of a Brick: Ethical Positions in Built Environment Education in Uganda

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Abstract

Architecture has among its goals, to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of society. It is therefore inevitable that ethical decisions are made in the process making architecture. The perceived value of the product, 'shelter' is often, taken for granted – until something goes wrong. It is only then that questions arise about quality of the product, the values of practitioners, and as a matter of course, to discussions about ethical positions forged as part of the education process. Contrary to common belief, ethical positions are not intrinsically inherent in society, but are learned as part of the formal and/or informal education process. As part of the five or six year architecture programme, students are exposed to a multitude of ethical positions, from basic value judgements related to beauty and aesthetics - good and bad; to investigations of historical attempts to portray truth and purity; to the more pragmatic and contemporary issues dealing with context, sustainability and social equality. While we debate the global issues of sustainability, the very essence of the design and construction of buildings comes into question – the brick, the essence of most construction in Uganda, thus becomes a symbol of this discourse. The Brick encapsulates a number of ethical positions, not only ecological and economic aspects of sustainability, but just as important, the social issues completing the triple bottom line. Not only in its physical form, but also as a metaphor, the brick can be viewed as a encapsulating various ethical positions in the educational system. This paper looks at educational context within which architecture education is situated in Uganda, and how this may have an impact on the eventual ethical positions taken by professionals.

Keywords: Ethics: Architecture: Professional Education: Ethical Values: Uganda.

Introduction

In Uganda, as in much of Africa, the role of built environment educators is seen as two fold: first, to educate individuals in a particular discipline; and second, to help students identify with the issues that they will be faced with in their chosen careers. Significant attention has been given to the pragmatics of the latter - the transmission of knowledge to enable development of a 'modern' society. This approach tended to ignore past experiences, and required the dislocation of students from their society as a prerequisite to becoming professionals. (Odoch Pido, 2002)

This process was reinforced by an enforced separation of 'Arts' and 'Science' at Secondary and Tertiary levels of education, in a fallacious belief that the two are separate educational entities, one subjective and based on 'the local', and the other objective and valued for its development of a modern society. To achieve the latter, one had to be 'bright' and undertake 'sciences', while the 'not so bright' took 'arts'. (Olweny, and Nshemereirwe, 2006) This perception persists to this day, perpetuating the view that to undertake a 'proper' science programme, one has to discard the social-cultural baggage of ones heritage - in effect discarding the very essence of humanity. Further, the logical positivist approach often seen in scientific inquiry was perceived to be objective, and therefore 'proper' science. In this light, the African paradigm has been taken as being backward, retrogressive, and unauthentic and as it had not been scientifically verified, and was therefore unreliable. (Ngara, 2007) In this regard, the educational setting becomes the main avenue through which a foreign aesthetic (and ethic) have been transmitted.

In relation to architecture, the prejudices of a profession of European origin still exists in architecture education to this day, and inevitably into architecture practice. Thus ensuing ethical debates related to architecture, culture and identity, based on the interplay between the historical origins of the profession, and the local context, exemplified by the 'Tree of Architecture' by Sir Bannister Fletcher, and seen in the following dialogue by Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, two early architectural educators who worked in West Africa during the 1950s and 1960s:

> *Maxwell Fry*: 'A Nigerian aesthetic? On what would it be based that is as solid as the plywood techniques, the old timber traditions of Finland?' *Jane Drew*: 'If a Nigerian genius were to be born, upon what deeply-felt indigenous art might it not feed – and be better digested, perhaps, than Picasso's reactions?' (quoted in Ihejirika, 2000: p185)

Such notions of beauty and aesthetics and prejudices against the local aesthetic naturally found their way from architecture education and into professional practice. In this setting, the African paradigm is regarded as being backward, retrogressive, and unauthentic as it has not been scientifically verified, and is therefore unreliable. (Ngara, 2007)

As educators, how therefore can we ensure that students gain an appreciation for the indigenous in light of an overwhelming bias towards 'the foreign'? What are our responsibilities as

educators in this discourse? Does it stop at a single course on ethics, or does it go further and actively engage students in discourse as part of their educational experience? (Olweny and Wadulo, 2008) These are some of the questions raised as part of an ongoing dialogue on the future of architecture education at the Uganda Martyrs University. Key to this dialogue is the purpose of architecture education and the values attached to this.

A Question of Ethics?

According to Koutsoumpos (2007), ethical behaviour is not intrinsically inherent in society, but must be learned if this is indeed the case. How then can ethics be taught in the context of the duality that exists between indigenous thought and western education systems and practice, not to mention the complex multi-ethnic societies in which architecture is practiced?   With education playing a key role in the formulation of ethical positions, surprisingly, there has been little dialogue about the importance of education in shaping our ethical positions, and the built environments that shape us.

A key consideration for us is the fact that ethics, and ethical values are not static, but are part of the evolutionary process of societal transformation, which Olweny CLM (1994) describes as 'value-re-standardisation' defined as changes to societal values and positions. Unfortunately, it is often perceived that such changes are often towards the negative. However, it should be pointed out that the conflict in this context arises not from the changed situation, but rather from the application of unchanged, or static rules and values to a changing situation.   More specifically, I can relate this to two legal documents in Uganda: the Uganda *Town and Country Planning Act 1951*, and the *Public Health Act 1964*.   These documents have existed virtually unchanged since their inception, and are the basis for determining planning approval. While the rationale for their existence is unquestioned, the justification for their continued application in their current form raises significant ethical dilemmas for professionals. Not only are these prescriptive documents, their continued uses fails to account for the value-re-standardisation in society, in effect rendering the Acts inappropriate.

A key example is in relation to building accessibility: not too long ago, the status of a building was defined by its inaccessibility - the number of steps to the main entrance representing the degree of importance of a particular work of architecture – its power and status. Today, this approach to architecture is viewed as inappropriate, with the need to have buildings accessible to all, a key requirement. While society demands this, legislation to ensure this happens is still

non existent (at least in Uganda), with the Accessibility standards still in draft form. Similarly, environmental and sustainability, contemporary issues in architecture were initially (and for the most part still are) being driven less by legislation, but rather by proactive professionals. Would it therefore be ethical to ignore the debate as it is not part of the legal statutes of the country? In a knowledge based system in which the need to conform to the existing laws, this would be straightforward, with the law taken precedence over common sense. On the other hand, in inquiry-based situations, one cannot justify ignoring the greater good, which takes precedence over the legislation, despite potential conflicts. Such as the removal of the mandatory 150mm step at the entrance.

With knowledge presented as the major component of education, and often transmitted unquestioned from teacher to student – it is evident that the educational process is in part responsible for the ethical dilemmas faced by professionals. The changing values in society over time demand changes in the approach to professional approaches, and consequently, the education and training of professionals should enable this to happen.

Roles of the Architect

What is the role of the Architect in a Developing Country like Uganda? For this answer, we take a brief journey to the past. Imhotep, the Egyptian High Priest and architect of the Step Pyramid complex of Djoser at Saqqara in Egypt – taken as the first architect known by name. Imhotep, was responding to the socio-eco-political demands of his employer, Horus Netjerikhet, better known as Djoser. The Architects of the first huts, on the other hand, were responding to more pragmatic concerns, primarily a demand for a waterproof and animal proof shelter. These two key aspects of architecture are still the basis of contemporary architecture. Although, the basic functions of architecture have not changed, a greater appreciation of the context of architecture now demands a different approach to the education and practice of architecture. Today legal issue now predominate with Fire egress, Environmental Responsibility, Health and Safety etc all presenting additional challenges to professionals. On the economic front, 'saving resources, and cost effective design is a buzz word, however this often translates to cost effective in construction rather than cost effective in operation, an approach which distorts the actual cost of building and operating buildings, and again is a raging debate in architecture practice.

In antiquity, the majority of humanity resided in rural environments and were responsible for

the provision of their own shelter. It is estimated that in 2007, the world's urban population exceeded its rural population for the first time in history. This rapid urbanisation significantly changes the role and relationship between architects and society. It is in urban centres, with a multitude of complex and often conflicting demands that the value of the architect as a professional is most overt. While contemporary architects are no longer undertaking the activities ascribed to the ancient 'Master Builders', they are nevertheless have to be highly skilled technologists, designers and educators, able to coordinate complex problems.

The nostalgic role of the architect as a 'Master Builder' – the god like figure, as depicted by Howard Roark in the Ayn Rand novel and movie of the same name, 'The Fountainhead' has a lot to do with the current state of practice. The uncompromising self-indulgent architect regarded as the norm, rather than the exception has made ethical consideration particularly pertinent for the profession today.

Ethics in Architecture Education

A number of key issues related to the architecture curriculum can directly impact on ethical positions in architecture practice. These include: i. the 'empty vessel approach' to teaching, in which students are treated as passive receptacles of information, coming to university to be "filled' with (pre-determined) wisdom of their professors (Saidi, 2005: Hill, 2006: Pérez-Gómez, 2007). The Odoch Pido, experience still a pertinent feature in university level education. This approach inevitably leads to 'Information Overload' with instructors spoon-feeding students "all the required information – indisputable facts – that would make them 'experts' in their careers … ." (Olweny and Nshemereirwe, 2006; Olweny, 2008) ii. Un-coordinated, programmes crammed with numerous information sessions, but little time available for exploration and reflection, inevitably resulting in 'Drawing Board Architecture'. (Perez-Gomez, 2007: 124) Clearly, architecture is not a classroom activity, but a social activity that should relate to the social and community aspects of the world, as such, the emphasis on classroom based instruction, dominated by numerous hours of lectures is part of the ethical dilemma of the profession the isolation of students from 'real world' conditions, exemplified by student narratives:

> "Sitting in the Ethics class, we often question its relevance to the Built
> environment because the ethical principles and philosophy relates so much
> more to the Ethics and Development Studies (EDS) class, than in our context.

There's definitely a need to revise that so we can focus on its relation to the
Built Environment" – (Second Year Student - Faculty of the Built
Environment)

According to Oliver (2005), few schools of architecture attempt to explicitly share an ethical
map with their students. This has been aided by a stress on individuality and competition,
above collaboration and team work. As a consequently, according to Cortese (2003), common
assumptions are rarely questioned, directly impacting on the ability to act ethically in the face of
conflicts. Some of the unquestioned assumptions still prevalent include: "Humans are the
dominant species and separate from the rest of nature; Resources are free and inexhaustible;
Earth's ecosystems can assimilate all human impacts; Technology will solve most of society's
problems; All human needs and wants can be met through material means, and; Individual
success is independent of the health and well-being of communities, cultures and the life
support system." (Cortese, 2003: p17) In architecture education, such assumptions often
translate into self-indulgent practice, resulting in an architecture that is perceived to have no
moral philosophy.

Education, Training and Integration

The location of architecture at the intersection between the 'Arts' and 'Sciences' has in part,
also contributed to some of the confusion in architecture education. This has been compounded
by the fact that architecture is in part a vocation, as much as it is an academic art.
Consequently, the approach to the education of architects tends to be a hybrid between
'education' in the true sense of the word, and 'training', in order to graduate well-rounded
architects. With architects having to work in situations for which they had not been explicitly
trained, and planning, for conditions that do not exist yet, it is imperative that they be enabled to
acknowledge the existence of dilemmas that they will be faced with.

The dominance of the training aspect of architecture, a consequence of a need to 'train'
architects for practice, immediately upon graduation has tended to bias architects away from the
discourse which is an integral as part of the process of making architecture. While both the
vocational and educational aspects are essential to architecture, too much of one over the other
is potentially disastrous. A poignant example is given by Jay Cross (1996) who illustrates this
by presenting the difference between '*sex education*' and '*sex training*'. Too much attention to
the training component often overshadows the educational component of architecture,

effectively stifling architectures key aspect, its multidisciplinary nature. This is further reinforced by an opposing view that architecture is a 'fine art' and therefore should stay away from pragmatics. The result, being a severely fragmented curriculum.

Conclusions

Viewing architecture as a holistic profession, it is clear that architecture education needs to be approached holistically. The relationship between Art and Science, Vocation and Education is the essence of good architecture education. The changing role of the architect in society demands that the architect professional is able to adjust their roles constantly. While training provides the basis for the practice of architecture, education provides the framework for the social context in which architecture exists. Compartmentalisation of knowledge into separate entities has reduced architecture to a mere assemblage of components, rather than a holistic professional discipline. Architecture is however, as much an ethical discipline as it is a design discipline. (Wasserman, et al., 2000)

As such, a lot more effort will be made to ensure ethical values are embedded in the architecture curriculum. During the short time students spend at university, educators can only begin to expose students to the ethical position in architecture. Like any area of the curriculum, it is impossible to exhaustively address ethics. Nevertheless students need to be exposed to ethics, rather than left in an ethical void. In relation to medical practitioners, Olweny CLM (1994) asks, "how do you remain ethical when the rest of the world around you appears to be unethical?" (Olweny, CLM, 1994: p172). Such a question could indeed be asked of architects as well. How can they maintain a certain level of ethical behaviour in light of constantly changing conditions? Is it only that we are applying a different set of ethical values in the wrong situation, or is it also that ethics has been left out of the architecture curriculum or selectively presented to students?

Clearly we cannot continue to maintain the status quo as it has not served two ends that are desirable, but rather to perpetuate a myth that architects are separate from reality. In order to redress the situation, it is essential that architecture education, and for that matter professional education be geared towards new approaches to learning and practice that enable students and graduates to take leadership roles. (Cortese, 2003: p17) Education is an enabling process, and by ensuring that it is presented as such will enable students to appreciate a broader range of ethical issues that they will and do face as part of the practice of architecture.

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