ISSN: 1755-068
www.field-journal.org
vol.5 (1)

Dialogue: David Gloster, Royal Institute of British Architects Director of Education

James Benedict Brown

David Gloster was appointed the Director of Education of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in September 2006. Prior to his current position, he was a principal lecturer and the postgraduate course leader at the Department of Architecture and Design at London South Bank University, as well as an architect and consultant. As Director of Education, David Gloster is responsible for a variety of programmes that support architecture schools, students and academics. He is also responsible for overseeing the RIBA programme of Validation. The RIBA validates architecture courses at both in the UK and internationally.[1] Validation is a peer-review process that monitors compliance with predetermined minimum standards in architectural education. The culmination of the validation process is the two day Validation Board visit to the school, in which a panel composing of practising architects, academics, architecture students, construction industry co-professionals assess the school's achievement against both the RIBA Validation Criteria and the school's own academic goals. Reports are published online.[2] A heavily revised version of the RIBA Validation Criteria was used by a Validation Board for the first time in September 2011, and will apply to all subsequent validations, which occur on a five year cycle.[3]

In December 2011, David Gloster spoke to James Benedict Brown to discuss the shape of architectural education.

[1] http://www.architecture.com/EducationAndCareers/Validation/Validatedcourses.aspx

[2] http://www.architecture.com/EducationAndCareers/Validation/UKvalidation.aspx

[3] RIBA Education, 2011. RIBA procedures for validation and validation criteria for UK and international courses and examinations in architecture. London: RIBA. [Online]. Available: http://www.architecture.com/Files/RIBAProfessionalServices/Education/Validation/ValidationProcedures2011.pdf [10 December, 2011]

field:
a free journal for architecture

www.field-journal.org
vol.5 (1)

JBB: We're meeting after the annual awards ceremony of the President's Medals, and it's obviously snapshot of what the Institute regards as the best of the best of the student work. Can you see any themes or patterns emerging in the work that's been chosen by the judges?

DG: Well I don't think it's what the Institute regards as the best, because it's actually judged by external assessors who are invited by the RIBA. So I think that the view that emerges is a view that is the peer group of the profession which we are all part of, whether we're academics or practitioners. If you think about the constituency of the people who were responsible for shortlisting and final judging, you've got a principal in a very well established practice, Oliver Richards who is our Vice-President for Education. You've got Edouard François, who is arguably is doing some of the more interesting work looking at resource efficient design. There's Alison Brooks, whose record as a practitioner in small and medium sized projects speaks for itself, and Jorge Ayala is who a very interesting emerging academic looking at aspects of parametric design and work that goes very much beyond. I think it's a very broad constituency that the judges are chosen from. In terms of themes emerging from the work, if you're looking at two hundred, two hundred and fifty plus entries, which is colossal, I think there's a very very strong sense that the social programme of architecture is re-emerging. That students of architecture at all levels are finding that architecture has got the potential to be a vehicle for, if you like, healing the city, addressing issues of social housing, working at levels that are both modest and actually visionary across a whole range of continents, countries and scales. I, personally, am interested and gratified that students are rediscovering the political programme of architecture, because for me it's always been implicit in the tenets of modernism that this is a social art and that we have a capacity, without wishing to sound pretentious and in the most modest way, to redeem.

JB: You say that a political programme is re-emerging. During your five year tenure as Director of Education and your preceding career as an educator, how have you seen that evolve?

DG: I think an unintended consequence of digital communication is the ease with which an image can zip round the world from Bognor to Bogota. In a sense, this is problematic for global competitions like the President's Medals, because the form of an idea can transmit itself extremely quickly without an understanding of the context, narrative or concept. I worry about that sometimes because we see, year after year, schemes which are a kind of uneasy cloning of something that emerged a year or two before. This isn't a massive trend but it's something that's discernible. I'm not going to say plagiarised because it isn't plagiarised, but it's an adaptation without a full understanding. I think there are different attitudes to drawing emerging. I think there's more of an accent in the better work of understanding the design development

process and documenting that, and I think in some entrants' work there is beginning to be an understanding that the way in which we approach cities strategically is going to need fundamental re-evaluation as we move from these blissfully utopian ideas of Haussmann, Adam or Nash, or for that matter, the post-war new capitals like Chandigrah or Brasilia. I think we're realising that we're moving out of that planned context of cities into a much uneasier and edgier idea of the informal city, and students of architecture are very interested in this because it's a completely different set of rules to which they feel they can contribute to uniquely. Certainly, people of my generation were brought up with the idea that things are orderly. And all the evidence in the world is that they're not. I think this is another thing that one's beginning to see in terms of the projects and the attitudes that students are taking towards them.

JBB: Notwithstanding the Great Recession, as it's now called,[4] that we're deep in, student numbers having been rising year on year for at least a decade.[5] So is the purpose of architectural education still to educate architects? Or has the definition of the architect changed?

DG: I've always regarded the purpose of an education in architecture as multi-dimension and I've never ever seen it as inevitably leading to a relatively narrow definition of being a professional practitioner. I think that one can be a professional practitioner without necessarily involving oneself in professional practice. I think that one has an attitude which is both a professional attitude and a practical attitude, but it's essentially taking the skill set that architectural education develops and applying that to a multitude of things. We don't see an education in English and American History as inevitably leading to a career as a historian of England and America. So I think there have been incredibly narrow expectations of what the results of an architectural education should actually be, either at Part I, Part II or Part III. Yes, the majority of people entering it probably, at the point of entry, have a preconception that they will work in practice, and indeed the majority do. That doesn't mean that that will be what they will do for the rest of their professional career. I think architectural education has always had incredible value as providing a very broad set of intellectual tools that equip you with all sorts of other things in the way that all the best liberal arts courses do. It also has the option for people to pack up that skill set and apply it to the business of building design and production. So the proliferation of students of architecture is of concern if one is having the unreasonable expectation they're all going to end up in professional practice. If one sees it as being an enabling process which makes people intellectually bold, enquiring, sensitive and caring about a wide range of issues and skilled in addressing those issues I think the numbers are not problematic. Not everyone would agree with that.

4 WESSEL, D., 2010. Did 'Great Recession Live Up to the Name? The Wall Street Journal, [Online]. Available: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303591204575169693166352882.html [11/11, 2011]

5 The RIBA publishes annual statistics on UK architectural education, the reports of which may be downloaded from: http://www.architecture.com/EducationAndCareers/Validation/EducationStatistics.aspx

field:
a free journal for architecture

www.field-journal.org
vol.5 (1)

[6] The Standing Conference of Heads of Schools of Architecture, an organisation to which the Head of every RIBA Validated school of architecture in UK is a member.

JBB: This year we've seen the introduction of the new RIBA Validation Criteria, and their deployment in the first Validation visits to schools of architecture. Could you perhaps reflect on why the process of re-considering the Validation Criteria came about?

DG: There were three aspects to the Delft Declaration made by SCHOSA[6] in 2004. It was really talking about the RIBA and its Validation system. The three legs of the stool were as follows: firstly, that the RIBA shouldn't validate first degrees which we were, unfortunately, unable to concur with. The second point was that there should be a single set of Validation Criteria that should be applicable to Parts I and II, to which we were sympathetic and which we adopted. The third point was that the Validation Criteria should be modelled and have very close adherence to the eleven points of the EU Directive for Architects. Again, we thought this was an entirely sensible and reasonable proposition, and again we adopted that. So the genesis of it was actually a position statement that the schools made at the Delft Conference, the Delft Declaration, of which we accommodated two thirds. If there was disappointment we didn't take the third leg of the stool and produce a stable structure, then I'm unapologetic. There is a value for universities that are developing courses in architecture in having RIBA Validation for first degrees, because everyone has to start somewhere in developing an academic profile.

JBB: There is perhaps an ideological difference between countries such as the USA where the student is assessed in their capabilities personally at the end of their education and countries such as Britain where the education is assessed. Can you see the merits and weakness in the two systems?

DG: Yes, if you're looking at courses which lead inevitably through a series of increments to this kind of big bang near the end, which is graduation, I can understand from the student's point of view that that is - and this isn't to denigrate that approach - a fairly simple system. You know perfectly well that you're requiring snippets of knowledge which go together are then exhibited essentially and significantly once, generally speaking right at the conclusion of a five year course. I think that's fine but I think that what we've developed in the UK is a more testing and searching system where, at every level of the course, there is an expectation that students are rehearsing through the vehicle of the design studio project an integrated understanding of theories, narratives, histories, technologies of architecture, how these fit into the professional context. This is then tested fundamentally at two levels, the Part I and the Part II. But at each term or semester's end, there's essentially a rehearsal for that. It is, to coin the cliché, practice making perfect, I think there's merit in that system. I think it's more demanding of the student. I think it also allows people at the exit point of Part I to say, yes, I've been through a process and I don't necessarily have to follow that with Part II or Part III.

The difficulty, I think, if you're looking at a five year course with a big bang at the end, is that there is no exit point below the big bang, the graduation, where the student can disengage themselves and feel that they've completed a programme of study. I understand completely the merits in both systems but I think that there is implicitly more flexibility in the idea of multiple exit points.

JBB: The new criteria were also intended to give the schools a little more freedom in how they might be interpreted, but ultimately, the way that Validation works is that it's a consideration of both the methods and the outputs of architectural education, because it considers the work the students and the curricula of the schools. Do you feel that there is a balance there in the way that the Validation process examines the methods of education and the outputs of education?

DG: Yes, I think so. I think it's an incredibly intensive and demanding process and, like any mechanism, it can't be perfected but it can be incrementally improved following multiple review. Ultimately, I suppose that we're looking at qualities of outputs and the strategic or methodological means for delivering those outputs. They're not of a lesser concern, but they are the means to the end. The end is the thing. I think that every Validation board is actually sensitive, however, to the students' experience of how those outputs are realised and would raise very properly concerns if the means of delivery, if you like, somehow impaired the students' experience and joy in learning.

JBB: Since the publication of *Tomorrow's Architect* [7] in 2003 and the QA Benchmarking document in 2010,[8] we've reached the point now where it's clearly stated in the RIBA Validation Criteria that "at least fifty per cent of all assessed work at Part I and Part II" must be carried out through the design studio.[9] What do you understand the design studio to mean, and why is it so important that fifty per cent of the curriculum must be delivered that way?

DG: Well I think there's always been extensive criticism of the UK system where's it's claimed that the presentation of design studio projects can be confrontational, adversarial, that it can be difficult for students to negotiate and and that studentscan be incredibly apprehensive about the experience even after they've been through it many many times. I think there are a number reasons that the design studio project is important. Firstly, at it's best, it's integrative for the reasons I've been through before. Secondly, the process of presenting to a peer group is an enormously valuable process, because it's about stating a thesis and defending it. And in the same way that a masters thesis or a doctoral thesis has to be structured, has to have authenticity to the means of research and the conclusions it reaches, so to does the design studio project. Now the reason that it's valuable is that it is, in a microcosm, a rehearsal of the client-

7 RIBA Education, 2003. Tomorrow's Architect. London: RIBA Publishing. (ISBN: 9781859461310)

8 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2010. Subject benchmark statement: Architecture. London: QAA. (ISBN: 9781849792011)

9 RIBA Education, 2011, op cit., p. 5.

architect relationship. Now, when I say client-architect relationship, that might be a commissioning client who's looking for building production as the outcome. It might be a publisher who's interrogating a potential writer that treats architecture. So essentially it's a proving ground for legitimacy and authenticity of theses at any kind of level, and that's an enormously valuable preparation for professional life in whichever direction that professional life is determined.

JBB: Would you say that it's important to be able to practice that without a client and outside the commercial architect-client relationship?

DG: That's a big question, because I think the legitimacy of a project's structure may vary enormously. My personal view is that one has to be slightly careful in constructing scenarios that say "dependent on the world changing this project might be a reasonable response to that changed world." You cannot facetiously say that a project is about redesigning France as, for example, a military dictatorship as opposed to a presidential republic. We don't work like that, but I think that if projects are legitimately framed on proper sites where there is an understanding of the political, social, cultural, spatial, architectural parameters that are controlling a design response to that site and to the project themes, the spatial, architectural, formal, narrative considerations that have been set in the studio, I think it has the nearest correlation to a live project that you can reasonably expect. Having said that, I also fundamentally endorse the presence of real clients in schools of architecture. Some of the most successful projects I've personally been involved with in schools of architecture have involved live projects with real clients who had real money and real sites and real concerns about what their building should and shouldn't embrace. I think that students are incredibly stimulated by that exposure. It's like all aspects of architectural education: there are lots and lots of different ways to skin the architectural cat.

JBB: The Validation process looks at how a school of course is resourced, so library, technology, staffing, quality assurance and so forth, all in order to determine whether that course is sustainable. Is it possible to test the pedagogical robustness or sustainability or a course?

DG: I think that in the way that the validation procedures as for an academic position statement from the schools that we are trying to test that pedagogical robustness. I think that this is a challenge for the schools. Schools are very clear about how they do what they do, but they don't always find the means to clearly articulate why they do it and why it's distinctive. To me, the biggest challenge the schools face, and in one sense one almost feels unfair to press them more on this point, is to get to a position where each school is able to stand up and state a position which they are able to aggregate the outputs they make and define this in a clear and coherent way such that students, staff and the university as a

whole understands what it is that they're doing. This isn't some kind of sick aphorism about one-sentence mission statements. It's actually more complex than that. You have to be able to understand that all parts of the school contribute to that distinctive academic position. So pedagogy is, in my opinion, vital. I think we often, in both education and profession, have an attitude towards the production of architecture in schools that is what I've always thought of as the Nike approach: "just do it." I just don't think the subject is as simple as that. I think it's incredibly complex, I think it's multi-layered. I think ultimately that design is a problem-solving activity which requires enormous intellectual effort and agility and I would like to get to a position where schools are better able to define how they communicate that to their students.

JBB: The RIBA doesn't just validate courses in this country and the make up of the awards represents the diversity of students and schools that are recognised here. In your travels and your work internationally, and also looking outside the discipline, what instances of architectural education or education in other disciplines do you think provide possible exemplars that we could learn from?

DG: Well, I'm not going to name institutions, but I think that the really interesting thing is in our consideration of international schools, just how diverse the models are. I'm thinking of schools where the connection to local, national and regional practice is incredibly close. The schools become, effectively, a production engine that supply that. There's actually nothing wrong with that role at all, it's useful, it's practical, it delivers the expectations of practice, and the students are immediately involved in building production. They translate almost everything that they do instantly into a constructional context. There's a very close adjacency about design, thinking about design and the delivery of it. I think that there are also other models where even getting into the school is a massive scholastic, academic and intellectual struggle that starts happening three years before the students might even step over the threshold of the school. It becomes this incredibly engrossing and, academically, very challenging process just to get into the school. But once those students are selected from a massive potential catchment you have a super-heated academic atmosphere because there are these extremely gifted students coming in, day one, week one, year one, and I think they goad each other into excellence. It produces a properly academically traditional atmosphere. That's another model. It's an old fashioned model, a kind of Beaux Arts model, but actually I believe that it's got relevance. You also have the educational models where there's a very strong work-based learning element, where the adjacency between the academic work and practice-based work is very very close and again I think that pays dividends. You have other schools, I'm thinking of some in Latin America where there's very very strong hands-on constructional programmes so that almost everything that the students learn is through an act of actual physical

field:
a free journal for architecture

www.field-journal.org
vol.5 (1)

making so that they're presenting technology as a driver of thought, the conceptualisation of projects and they're realisation. There's an infinite number of models out there and they're all very rewarding.