

Rowe and Solomon at the Crossroads of Architectural Education

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Abstract: Dan Solomon's book, *Love versus Hope*, comes at a particularly propitious time for architects and cities. With a world facing complex overlapping challenges of climate change, mass immigration, shortages of affordable housing and the forces of globalization, to name but a few, Solomon's thesis about the power of place and the imperative for architects to understand how to shape it can be seen as an essential and necessary approach in promoting a more sustainable, just and equitable society. In Solomon's case, that shaping occurs through the design of dignified and equitable residential projects, based on context yet also recognizing that a simple-minded return to techniques of the past probably will not suffice.

Appearing (or lurking?) throughout Solomon's text is the figure of Colin Rowe, author with Fred Koetter of *Collage City*, arguably the first thesis to articulate the problems of "mod arch" as an approach to the city and to offer insights about how the problems of "light, air and sunshine" might be accommodated in forms other than the Radiant City of Le Corbusier or the Zeilenbau blocks of the Bauhaus. Like Rowe, Solomon is a "mod arch graduate", educated in the basics of modernism as a "true believer" and over the course of his career, began to see cracks in the theories that were the basis of his education. Like Rowe and Koetter, Solomon sees the power and grace of much of modernism's notable achievements yet unlike Rowe and Koetter, his insights and critique are largely based on insights gained through practice and observation, rather than through questioning the fundamental intellectual assumptions of modernism.

Solomon's conversational style of writing is both engaging and perhaps a tad misleading. Although accessible in a way many current critics are not, he delivers a critique of both the Congress for the New Urbanism as well as the orthodoxy of education in architecture at many of the (thought to be by many) leading schools of design. Solomon makes a great effort to identify workaday neighborhoods in Rome, often overlooked by the academic elite, that can serve as models for the making of the modern city. So, with the virtues of those models in mind and the current multiple crises of society compounding everyday, and recognizing that the poles of New Urbanism and the GSD might not be enough, what would an architectural education look like, as proposed by Rowe and Solomon? What sorts of changes would need to be made and how would that be taught?

This paper will propose an initial way of thinking about educating architects based on place and place-making, advocating for an education that can place architects in meaningful positions to address climate change, dislocation, and alienation. And, like

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Solomon and Rowe, seeking to synthesis urbanism and modernism without throwing the baby of “mod arch” out with the bathwater.

Colin Rowe once described himself as a “modern architecture graduate,” (borrowing from Bernard Berenson’s description of himself as a “Christianity graduate”) and it might be equally fair to say that Dan Solomon could be described in much the same manner, a “graduate” of the school of modern architecture. Over the course of time as insights and experiences grew, both Rowe and Solomon formulated critical stances about modernism. Rowe’s position was formed initially as a critic and Solomon’s insights perhaps informed more from the point of view of a practitioner, but both have been deeply immersed over the arc of their respective careers, in architectural history and the translation of that history through theory into design practice.

Rowe, as is well known, possessed a deep and profound understanding of history – architectural and otherwise – and much of his work, from *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa to Collage City* (authored with Fred Koetter) focused upon bridging the gap between a modernism assumed by many of its original propagandists to have been an ahistorical movement, and history itself. Rowe covers vast territory, from individual architects and buildings to challenging the assumptions about urbanism and urban form of the heroic modern period. His famous insights about the similarities between the Le Corbusier’s Villa Stein at Garches and the Villa Malcontenta by Palladio speak to the historical/conceptual basis of modernism and reside at the scale of the individual building, while *Collage City*, speaks to the rupture of modern urbanism and the idea that to rebuild the city one must view urban form as an engaging physical continuity with the artifacts of history.

Solomon’s bandwidth of interest, illustrated in *Housing and the City: Love versus Hope*, is perhaps narrower, born out of an architectural practice deeply influenced by a singular place, San Francisco, and focused on housing, in particular how the aggregation of housing makes livable and equitable neighborhoods through the vehicle of urban design. Solomon, as related in *Love versus Hope*, embraces the genius loci, a sense that the architect, as a primary act, must understand the place from a variety of points of view-physical, social, cultural- in order to arrive at an architecture that is appropriate and meaningful. Both Rowe and Solomon greatly value the city, but perhaps for different reasons. For Rowe, the city represents the possibility of continuity with the past, the physical evidence of history in built form. For Solomon, a

social equity imperative lies at the basis of his approach and practice, seeking ways to seamlessly weave the affordable into sites rich with history and the complexities of context. Rowe (and Koetter) sees the intersection of ideas, power and taste as a “collage” and readily accepts the possibility that the city can receive influences from outside its own supposed *genius loci*, for example Leo Von Klenze in Munich, transporting a Greek Neo-classicism to a Bavarian context.

Solomon’s might be less catholic, his work defined by a search for connection to a place, an authenticity born directly out of a specific context and seeking to sustain “place” through the making of the residential blocks of the city.

Interestingly, despite evidencing a high degree of criticism and skepticism of “mod arch” in both *Collage City* and *Love vs Hope*, neither Rowe nor Solomon are willing to erase modernism from the collective architectural consciousness, as many today might propose. Rather, both seem to seek a *détente* with modernism, a thoughtful critical approach that might allow for its inclusion in a broader context of architecture and urbanism, history, theory and design. Both see modernism as brilliant and problematic, innovative and destructive, inspiring and depressing at the same time. Both seek to excoriate it for urban transgressions and yet salvage what might be worth salvaging.

Rowe’s critical insights came as the world surged with prosperity, a capitalist economy embracing the forms of an urban theory born out of a post-World War I utopian theory of architecture and urban form, transplanted to the US as the country morphed into a production economy in the 1950’s while the suburbs exploded in growth. Progress became synonymous with “newness” and the destruction of historic city cores a necessary consequence of “progress”. Architectural education relegated “history” to a useful but non-essential role in the acquisition of knowledge.³

Solomon’s intellectual context comes at a slightly different time than Rowe’s. Solomon’s world is one with increasing disparity of income, obliteration of the authenticity of place through globalization, an advancing climate crisis and an educational context paralyzed by theory and, for the most part, delivering an education in architecture rendering most of its recipients incapable of making urban form and cities.

3. Architectural History was marginalized in the 1990s when NCARB removed it from the Architects Registration Examination, and it has recently further been under attack as it has been relegated to the margins of education by NAAB.

A few other distinctions might also be illuminating. Solomon seems focused on elevating the populist view (“Mommy you mean we get to live with the rich people now?”⁴) while Rowe seems intent on translating the architecture of the elite for broader usage, for example the Roman/Florentine palazzo becoming the model for the urban housing fabric of New York City. With Solomon we see a preoccupation with Serlio’s Comic Scene, the bourgeois “life as it happens” crossed with the authenticity of the *genius loci*, with Rowe perhaps more aligned with the Tragic Scene an orderly place reflecting the impact of money, power and taste on the form of the city. Solomon sees the Roman neighborhood of Testaccio as an authentic 19th and early 20th century “place” reconstituting the principles of Rome, courtyard blocks, albeit in a perhaps rationalized condition. For Rowe “place” is an analogous experience, authenticity is negotiable (and transformed) as an accumulation (or invasion?) of set-pieces and collages from one place informing and (re)structuring another, the *genius loci* impacted by the forces of taste and power.

Solomon operates at the scale of the building in urban fabric, particularly housing, with the Comic Scene incrementally transforming the city, step by step with place specific projects, while Rowe’s preferred vantage point is the scale of the entire city, embodied in the figure-ground technique, viewing type as a generalized building block of urban fabric with specific interest in set-pieces, gardens, stabilizers and other urban elements illustrated in *Collage City* that comprise memorable public spaces.

Solomon’s repair recipe for the City of Hope mitigates the rupture brought about by modern architecture by strategically adapting housing typologies to define urban space. Rowe’s urban design studio initially sought to mitigate the rupture brought about by modern architecture via traditional urban fabric (contextualism), eventually looking toward extensions of order through models that, although perhaps foreign to the place itself, had sufficient compositional, structural, and iconic form to be legible, transferable and adaptable.

Clearly Rowe and Solomon each offer a rich array of insights and approaches to repair the city of modern architecture largely based

4. Conversation between Brian Kelly and Dan Solomon, in San Francisco, in January 2019, while visiting his affordable housing project in Mission Bay at 1180, 4th Street. This child’s impression of the building as luxurious, a trait seldom associated with affordable housing, is ever present in Solomon’s built work.

on things Solomon would group as part of the City of Love. Both would likely agree that the city and “walkable urbanism” carries significant value and, as Solomon would agree, is a significant (if not the most significant) tool architects can use in the battle against climate change. So, if the approaches are compatible yet not identical, and if according to both authors all of this is worth learning and we assume that all of this is eminently “teachable”, what would a professional curriculum in architecture look like based on a synthesis of their approaches and how might it be different than the typical education architects receive today? As a foundation, history and its translation to design principles through theory would play a major role. Typically history and theory courses are taught as separate entities at most schools of architecture, leaving to the student to synthesize the relationship between the two. As Solomon points out, theory occupies a prominent position in the first few semesters of many architecture curricula and can serve to distance the student from the physical artifact of architecture itself and imply that the enterprise of theory is an end in itself, not subject to popular criticism. Rowe, similarly, was skeptical of theory in the absence of the physical object and interestingly cited, later in his career, the approach of French architect and theorist Julian Guadet as the model for how history and theory might be integrated.

Rowe was suspect of what theory, and even more so criticism, had become at the close of the 20th century. In an epistle to the Cornell Architecture Curriculum Committee penned on October 3, 1988, Rowe provided a scathing critique of a proposed new program in architectural history, theory and criticism. Noting that theory in the later half of the 20th century had become “rather more abstract,” and “...pretentious, absurd, and detrimental to undergraduates who have no idea of how to put buildings together.”⁵ Guadet was offered as a tonic for this ailment. Ironically in his own education at the University of Liverpool, Rowe along with Bob Maxwell and Jim Stirling were indoctrinated in Guadet as part of the school’s curriculum. But, in the context of an evolving modern movement in architecture, Guadet was understood by the trio as being particularly retardataire, so Rowe along with his peers rejected him. “We found them [the lectures on Guadet] abominable”.⁶

But by 1988, Rowe had reconsidered his position on modern

5. Daniel Nagele (ed.), *The Letters of Colin Rowe, Five Decades of Correspondence*, Artifice Editions, 2016, p. 304.

6. Nagele, *The Letters of Colin Rowe*, p. 302.

architecture and on the value of Guadet's four volume *Eléments et Théorie de L'Architecture*, which had become a central doctrine of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, and the baby that was thrown out with the bathwater by modern architects. Rowe recalled: So what was Guadet, super pontifical, all about?

As far as I remember, he told you all about beginnings, middles, and ends; about portes cochères, vestibules, incorporated vestibules, circulations, types of staircases, where to place them, the gradients of stairs, how to arrange an enfilade, and all of the rest of the stuff which is now forgotten because it seemed assumed that, with the arrival of modern architecture (unlimited freedom?) and all such issues would vanish away.

However, this did not turn out to be the case; issues unrecognized simply become problems unresolved; and the results are only too evident in nearly all recent buildings... in short, there has occurred more or less a complete collapse of the capacity to produce a coherent plan.⁷

But resurrecting the corpse of Guadet would constitute a heroic undertaking that, even before 1988, had been recognized by Rowe. In a review of Talbot Hamlin's, *Forms and Functions of Twentieth Century Architecture*, which appeared in *The Art Bulletin* (1953), Rowe provided a cool reception to this attempt to update and modernize Guadet, "its successor [Hamlin's book] ...could have become equally significant had there been a greater realization of the essential reasons why Guadet had become "woefully inadequate".⁸ In the review of Hamlin's book, Rowe shares deeper insights into Guadet and greater appreciation of the significance of his work than one might have expected from Rowe during his renegade Liverpool years.

The difficulty of indeed resurrecting Guadet or creating a modern sequel a la Hamlin, is perhaps reconciled in part in "Architectural Education: USA," a lecture that Rowe presented in 1974 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, and later published in *Lotus International*, no 27 (1980). Rowe, the "modern architecture graduate,"⁹ provides a vignette of architectural education, which we, the authors, believe to be a valid starting point for an architectural curriculum:

7. Nagele, *The Letters of Colin Rowe*, p. 302-303.

8. Colin Rowe, *As I was Saying*, Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays, Volume One Texas, Pre-Texas, Cambridge, *Review: Forms and Functions of Twentieth Century Architecture by Talbot Hamlin*, The MIT Press, 1996, 120.

9. The lecture/article begins by referencing Berenson's remarks about having been a "Christianity graduate," and in which Rowe dubbed himself a "modern architecture graduate."

I presume architectural education to be a very simple matter; and the task of the educator I am convinced can be quite simply specific as follows:

1. to encourage the student to believe in architecture and Modern architecture;
2. to encourage the student to be skeptical about architecture and Modern architecture;
3. then to cause the student to manipulate, with passion and intelligence, the subjects or objects of his conviction and doubt.¹⁰

The sketch presents the ideas of “faith” and “doubt,” which in Rowe’s mind, and in our minds too, is essential to a student’s mastery of a new language. You begin by learning and believing in the elements, principles, and syntax of the formal language of “architecture and Modern architecture,” as Rowe characterizes the situation. The idea echoes Jean Piaget’s description of early stages of play in which children learn game rules and believe them to be absolute.¹¹ The rules for architecture are history, both distant and modern. With time, students learn that there are alternative, opposing, or contradictory sets of rules, and that their own initial rule sets are not absolute, “skepticism” enters, and with that theory, which is the basis for explaining history and its ambiguities in design. The final stage of manipulation is often branded by Rowe’s critics as “mere formalism,” but is in fact related simultaneously to the ideas and forms (for without form one cannot have meaning), which are to be the basis for synthesis of new rules and new avenues of exploration.

With this in mind we might propose a framework of curricula, synthesizing in part Rowe and Solomon in support of: Representation Skills in which students learn a variety of design media including manual drawing, physical model-making, and digital media, all of which have an ability to perform a “check and balance” on a designer’s insights into the problem at hand.

Elements and Principles in which students rigorously learn about floors, doors, walls, columns, beams, arches, vaults, apertures, rooms, plan libre, enfilades, *poche*, *degagement*, *en suite*, re-centering, and more, providing for students the essential tools in the designer’s tool kit.

10. Colin Rowe, *As I was Saying*, p. 54.

11. See: Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*, (New York: Piaget posits that children learn first through haptic experience; then through adoption and application of a rigid set of rules; then they learn that other children may have contradictory or nuanced rules that don’t neatly fit with their own, which in turn causes doubt; the final stage involves synthesis of new sets of rules.

History and Theory of Architectural Design in which students learn about buildings, cities, landscapes, interiors, art, and the cultures in which these expressions of architectural form developed over time and into the present day. History would provide insights into what happened and theory would extract principles from those histories that could be applied in the design studio. These are not two separate courses but an active synthesis between the two.¹²

History and Theory of Architectural Technologies in which students gain a historical perspective of building trades, crafts, materials and technologies as they have developed and informed architecture and modern architecture. Today technology is taught in the present, with a nod toward the future, but something is lost if one doesn't understand problems of building have been resolved over time.¹³

Design Process and Methodology in which students learn strategies and tactics for "manipulating with passion and intelligence, the subjects or objects of his conviction and doubt." Students learn that architecture is not about self-expression (architecture may in fact be the most impersonal of all of the arts) but rather learn design process and critical judgement by transforming investigations of precedent and place. The design process is simultaneously concerned with the "subjects" of architecture, meaning its ideas and the "objects" of architecture, meaning its form. It is about meaning and form simultaneously.¹⁴

Typology in which students learn about types of buildings, gardens, and urban constructs with little or no distinction between historical examples and modern architecture, seeking to illustrate the continuity of ideas and types, not a uniqueness or rupture based on chronology.

Design studio then, might seek a more active synthesis between history, theory and design, exposing the student to the context of

12. Rowe, in his letter to the Cornell Architecture Curriculum Committee, went on to quote Irwin Panofsky, "The relationship between the art historian and the art theorist may be compared to that of two neighbors who have the right of shooting over the same district while one of them owns the gun and the other all the ammunition. Both parties would be well advised if they recognized this condition of partnership." Nagele, *The Letters of Colin Rowe*, 303.

13. We are reminded of Le Corbusier's words, "There is no such thing as primitive man. There are primitive resources. The idea is constant, strong from the start." Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (London: The Architectural Press, 1927), 66.

14. Our late colleague Tom Schumacher used to recount a discussion that took place at a Princeton faculty meeting in which one colleague defined architecture as "a system of building - *baukunst*," another colleague immediately chimed in, "but you are wrong, it is a system of representation!". Schumacher used to grin and say, "But it is clearly both."

historical examples (construction techniques, social imperatives, political ideals and ideas) building chronologically an understanding of what happened, why it happened and perhaps most importantly, what we can learn as architects from that knowledge. Theory, then, has the responsibility to take that history and reorder it based on things other than chronology, such as typology, circulation, spatial/organizational schemes, construction types, etc... so that the student has both an understanding of history or “place” (context for Rowe, *genius loci* for Solomon) and how to apply that understanding to architectural problems. And, unlike most curricula of today and advocated by both Rowe and Solomon, modern architecture would appear seamlessly alongside the rest of history, not as a special category, either to be worshipped (“we embrace the *Zeitgeist*”) or to be ignored (“we reject it because it is modern”).

To dive deeper, Solomon’s approach might include, for design studio problems, lectures and readings that might more profoundly illuminate, aside from architectural history, the essence of the place through music, literature and political theory, the *genius loci* of all, so to speak. Rowe’s might be more focused on how the introduction of the new precedent might impact understanding the context of the problem, provoking a confrontation between that which is and that which could be. Thus equipped, the student could synthesize both the formal issues (and potential) of the site and subsequent proposals and acquire some of the necessary cultural, social and political insights to make more informed critical decisions about the efficacy of design options.

With the above as an overall approach, the curricula would then alternate between core problems that make the fabric of the city, such as residential problems and housing (more Solomon in *Love* versus *Hope* than Rowe) and problems that make the public buildings, interiors, public spaces and set-pieces of the city, a la Rowe/Koetter in *Collage City*. Upper level studios could engage a broader range of issues, such as design for climate change and simultaneously, perhaps, challenge the purity of type learned in earlier semesters (belief and doubt!). Ultimately, the education delivered would render the idea that the city is capable of hosting inventions/interventions of form that could synthesize both the Comic and the Tragic, provide a greater taxonomy for students of how the city can adapt simple and complex programs, withstand and profit from change; and, continue to be the locus of sustainable and meaningful places to live.