

A House Is a City

November 2016

I remember a nice tale about a king who detested small things and demanded that his tiny kingdom would build the largest houses in the world. Because the houses were built very high, some lived above the clouds and some below. Those fortunate enough to live above the clouds expanded their houses, overshadowing those beneath. Among them was the king. His palace was built over the largest cloud, and roads had to be built to interconnect with other clouds and houses. Shops and many public buildings had to be built as a well. Eventually the lower city had to be abandoned, because no one wanted to live overshadowed by the upper city.

This story might illustrate quite well our own erratic attitude, the way we exploit our planet Earth, plundering its resources and destroying its beauty, ready to abandon it as soon as another comfortable vehicle becomes available.

The reasons for our behavior are economic, political, and cultural, but we, as architects, have to admit that what and how we build is a direct result of the kind of education that schools of architecture provided in the twentieth century. There was no incentive to study architecture as a city art. This subject ended with the last student leaving Otto Wagner's school in Vienna; his name was Jože Plečnik. Later he made wonderful interventions in the urban fabric of Ljubljana.

On the other hand, the infamous Bauhaus under the direction of Henry Van de Velde, Walter Gropius, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, with teachers such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Marcel Breuer has produced not one known architect, and neither has it raised any particular interest in town planning. Walter Gropius at Harvard and Mies van der Rohe at MIT yielded no better results.

The aim of architectural education is of course to prepare architects for their future task. According to Adolf Loos, the architect is a "mason fluent in Latin." However, schools of architecture in the twentieth century taught neither masonry nor Latin, and concentrated instead on methods of construction and, more recently, on "creativity" and "imagination." However, one cannot teach creativity and imagination, as no one knows what these elusive substances are. Besides, the faculty of architecture schools cannot be composed of only those with a wild imagination and unusual creativity.

Schools of architecture do not really need geniuses as teachers, but professionals who can explain and convey what the profession of architecture is about, as well as architectural history, its basic methods of construction, economy of means, human and urban scale, our global resources, and above all the architects' responsibility to society. These subjects demand intelligent professionals to make the student aware of the complexity of architecture. Students' imaginations and creativity will develop on a fertile ground of knowledge. Knowledge is, after all, the substance education is composed of.

In my opinion, the failure of an architectural education is most clearly evident in our built environment and more precisely in our cities.

Comparing the results of nineteenth-century expansion of all the major European cities with the spread and enlargement of those cities in the twentieth century, it is obvious that the latter work was done by

architects unprepared for the task. Paris, Barcelona, Vienna, Moscow, Madrid, Berlin were enlarged in the nineteenth century by architects who possessed the needed expertise, the wide technical knowledge of and inventiveness to incorporate new technologies like sewage and gas within the urban fabric, with radio, telephone, electricity, and trams following close behind. Those were revolutionary changes, and look how well they were incorporated. Even today, the plans of Baron Haussmann in Paris and of Ildefons Cerdà in Barcelona provide us with great examples.

The twentieth-century architect left the school of architecture unprepared for the task, indoctrinated by Le Corbusier's self-aggrandizement instead of Camillo Sitte's precise knowledge.

Much of recent architectural education is concerned with the particular, with the unique instead of with the common and the ordinary, the very elements that eventually make the extraordinary. A house for a flute player and his dog companion absorbed the energy of great minds in many schools of architecture.*

If we care about the future of our cities, we have to first change our architectural education. Architects have to learn that a responsibility to society is their mission. It has to be done by addressing and combining the investors' initiatives with public needs. This cannot be achieved within today's programs in the majority of architecture schools.

Architecture has the longest tradition of all the arts; it was always concerned with building houses to create cities. This task is also relevant today.

The PKO complex designed by Szyszko-Bohusz in 1926 in Krakow is, in my opinion, one of the greatest examples of how a house becomes a city.

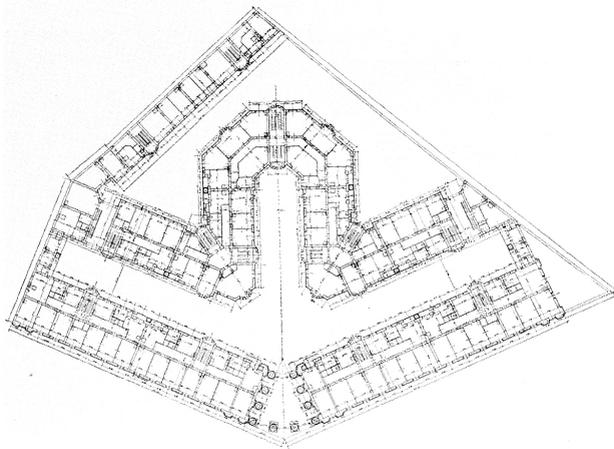
Zvi Hecker

*Hans Hollein at the Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien was an exception, providing students with the best examples of world urbanism.

Text written for: XV International Scientific Conference—Faculty of Architecture, Krakow University of Technology, November 25–26, 2016



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House for the employees of P.K.O.
Krakow, 1923-1925
Architect: Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz

1. Areal view

source: Imagery ©Google, Map data ©2016
Google

2. Plan of the ground floor

3. View of the interior courtyard

source: Michał Wiśniewski, Adolf Szyszko-
Bohusz, Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2013

