

ON COMMON GROUND

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YALE-NEW HAVEN TEACHERS INSTITUTE

“LINKAGES”

Linkages

By Kent C. Bloomer

The accumulated knowledge of the arts and sciences is a cultural legacy that ought to be the public property of a modern society. Yet recent educational practices have promoted a condition of hyper-specialization and a professional sequestration of cultural wisdom. In the somewhat strident words of Christopher Lasch, an emergent "Aristocracy of talent . . . lacks any acknowledgement of reciprocal obligations between the favored few and the multitude. Although they are full of 'compassion' for the poor, they cannot be said to subscribe to a theory of noblesse oblige, which would imply a willingness to make a direct and personal contribution to the public."¹

Architecture is a case in point. Although many architects do have compassion for lives of city dwellers, the study of architecture is virtually non-existent in primary schools and treated only occasionally in secondary schools. Coursework in architecture is very limited as an introductory subject in colleges, only to flourish as a highly professionalized five-year bachelor's or three-year master's program in approximately a hundred schools throughout the United States. Ironically, this elite educational system may be over-producing the number of professionals while avoiding an immense constituency of persons who are affected every day by a world of rooms, buildings, streets, monuments, and urban places, the conditions of which go begging for some form of lively public discussion. In fact, the nature of architecture, like music, can be taught as an open subject of inquiry rather than as a closed professional discipline at any level of education from kindergarten onward.

I led three seminars about architecture, mostly to primary and middle-school teachers, within the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. All of the teachers taught customary subjects such as English, mathematics,
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¹Lasch, Christopher, *The Revolt of the Elites*, New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, pp. 44-45.

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and social studies, while a few also taught drama and painting. None had ever investigated architecture in a classroom setting, but they soon understood that their own “subjects” provided some fundamental means of observing and analyzing aspects of public buildings and places. And our subordinate topic, architectural ornament and public monumentality, engaged everyone’s interests and expertise.

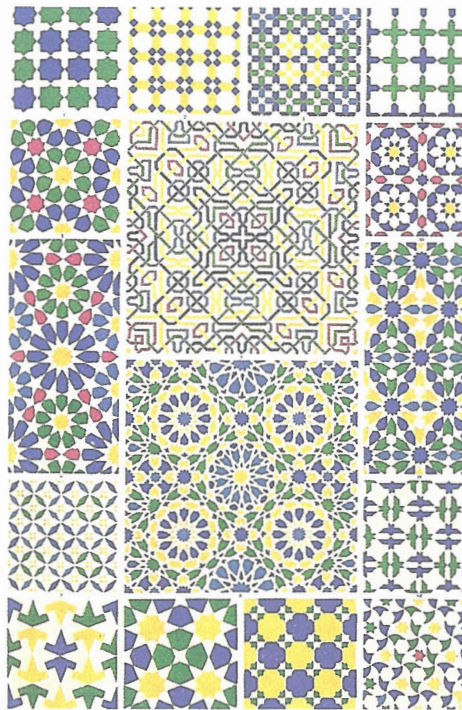
Several of the teachers, who were engaged in multi-cultural studies, studied the typical plans of a mosque and the rhythmic patterns in African flat-pattern ornament. The plans of the mosques demonstrated the architectural power of decorated walls positioned to face towards Mecca and thus to define the domain of a people. Examples of African flat-pattern ornament also drew attention to walls as architectural tablets for cultural expression. In many African traditions the importance of a decorated doorway to proclaim the rites of entry, possession, and exit illustrated the architectural power of a threshold. A drama instructor dramatized that liminal condition in local American architecture by asking his students to write and perform a play that included constructing a familiar front door on the stage as a principal character in a dialogue.

A mathematics and social studies teacher focused on the capitals upon the Greek columns gracing the entrance of her aging New Haven school building as ancient figures descended from the myths that flourished at the dawn of western society. Another mathematics teacher employed local church steeples as vehicles for understanding proportion and the relation of buildings to the human body. Her students would measure their own bodies and then, by counting the number of bricks or clapboards commensurate with their body height, they would deduce the size of a church steeple either by direct observation or by overlaying “body units” upon a pho-

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tograph. Besides providing the students with tools of measurement and subdivision those exercises alerted the class to the architectural profiles and civic dimensions of their hometown.

Another teacher, combining instruction in artwork and ethnic history, persuaded his students to construct an immense model of the ancient Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. He rolled out a piece of paper approximately five by twelve feet on the classroom floor and asked everyone to construct individual models of pyramids, houses, palaces, or riv-



F. BEDFORD, MORESQUE NO. 5, 1856

ers to be pasted onto the paper rug. It did not matter that the students produced huts that were occasionally bigger than pyramids and rivers that might turn out to be smaller than the sidewalks—or that most of their families were from Puerto Rico rather than Mexico. What mattered was their collective production, from a hodgepodge of diagrams and photographs, of a dazzling model of a lost city that could be rolled up like a rug and taken from one schoolroom to another as a proud display of their architectural knowledge and achievement.

One of the seminarians, Bill Derry, was a

teacher, librarian, and media expert who was about to be appointed Director of Library Media for all of the New Haven public schools. Several months after the seminar he invited me to come look over a cramped little library room in a local elementary school. Derry, school administrators, potential donors, a library consultant, and I met in what appeared to be an ordinary classroom overstuffed with books, furniture, and cramped spaces for reading and instruction. At our next meeting I included some graduate students from the Yale School of Architecture. At this “extended” seminar, the school’s principal presented a wish list that included a bowl of fish as an important provision for the library. Objections to the fish as frivolous in light of the library’s desperate needs faded when the principal explained that the young students might benefit from seeing a colorful and watery sign of life placed within the interior wall so as to be visible from the long, dark, and windowless corridor. The idea of the fishbowl created the theme “fishing for knowledge.” Other walls were broken open as doorways to additional space in adjacent storage and counseling areas. Several Yale students volunteered to build and contribute new furniture embellished with wave patterns reminiscent of the sea. Money, computers, rugs, and light fixtures were donated by banks and local industries with mounting enthusiasm. The first phase of the library improvement and expansion was completed as scheduled.

We need more such “linkages.” Forms of knowledge now sequestered in graduate professional programs can quite easily be experienced and basically understood by others, including the very young, if there is a direct and creative connection between individual teachers from both graduate and elementary schools. While the professionally educated played an important role in our “extended” seminar, so did the “amateurs,” who came to realize that a small architectural project could be as celebrative as it was practical. Surely our public architecture would be more exciting and pervasive if it were linked to a constituency cultivated in the subject.