EXPLORATIONS  Historical Case Study

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN ARCHITECTURE: THE INSTITUTE FOR ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN STUDIES

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The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies is known for its publications, especially Oppositions and Skyline. Nevertheless, it was originally conceived as an alternative to established schools of architecture. Founded by Peter Eisenman with the support of the trustees of the Museum of Modern Art and Cornell University, when it began operations in Midtown Manhattan in the fall of 1967, it presented itself as an “independent educational corporation” whose declared goal was to enhance the system of architectural education as well as planning processes. By acquiring public contracts, it intended to bridge “the gap between the theoretical world of the university and the pragmatic world of the planning agencies,” and to achieve social relevance for architecture.

Graduate students were invited to attend an urban design studio and work on concrete urban projects. The entire range of physical planning was integrated, from conceptual design to implementation. In addition, the faculty offered seminars in the theory of architecture and urban design, as well as in the social sciences, humanities, and engineering. In the initial period, the Institute was heavily dependent on tuition, and the relationship to MoMA’s Department of Architecture under Arthur Drexler was crucial both financially and on the level of ideas. Research was exhibited in close cooperation between the two organizations. The jointly organized conferences “Architecture Education U.S.A.” and “Universitas Project” both made substantial contributions to the debate on architectural education.

By the time the AIA honored the Institute for its research and educational programs in 1976, a reorientation had already taken place. New York’s financial crisis had resulted in a shortage of publicly financed projects, and so the Institute was no longer conceived of as a research institution. Instead, with an extension of the network of fellows, staff, and guests, it was systematically transformed into a teaching center and claimed three new territories: the architectural journal Oppositions, which was promoted as an instrument of dialogue with architects, theoreticians and historians overseas, especially in Italy; an exhibitions program, which would go on to host thirty-two shows altogether; and an evening lecture series directed not only to architects, but also to a lay audience. Educational programs were added for undergraduate students from colleges that did not have schools of architecture, and for high school students to learn basic architectural principles.

In the second half of the 1970s, the Institute developed into a public forum for the debate on architecture in New York City. In the spring of 1977 an interdisciplinary series of lectures was organized. “City as Theater” drew from Lewis Mumford’s Culture of Cities in considering the city as both a physical frame and a dramatic setting. Experts from different disciplines and professions lectured about the drama of life in New York City. Admission to the eighteen evening lectures was free.

With generous support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, in 1977 the Institute started what would be its biggest project in architectural education, OPEN PLAN. In the four associated lecture series, Architecture, The City, The Arts, and Design, architecture was discussed as an expression of American culture. For three academic years, lectures and follow-up seminars were offered each night of the week, and every four weeks a unique, open round table discussion between the disciplines was hosted. This program was the final step in institutionalizing a culture of debate in architectural and urbanistic circles in New York City. It is within this framework that Rem Koolhaas, who had been a visiting fellow at the Institute before, presented Delirious New York in the autumn of 1978, just in time for the publication of his first monograph.

An Advanced Design Workshop was installed in 1978, which ought to have profited from the intellectual ambition of the seminars of OPEN PLAN. Next to other respectable architects, the Institute managed to acquire Aldo Rossi, who also was lecturing at Yale at that time. When Peter Eisenman resigned as Director in 1982, his successor saw his main task as simply to maintain the status quo until the Institute was shut down in 1984. Ultimately, it seems that its historical relevance is not derived from the didactics, methods and contents of its educational programs. Rather, the Institute was able to play to the gallery by identifying a target audience that reached from ninth grade to postdoctoral students and beyond. On this basis it installed a complex, far-reaching network of architectural educators, which has decisively marked US architectural culture and which is still active today.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Poster designed by Massimo Vignelli for the lecture series “City as Theater,” held at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies between March 1 and June 29, 1977.