

Eight statements about the present and future of teaching design

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Jonathan Sergison & Stephen Bates

Eight Statements about the Present and Future of Teaching Design

trans: You've got a professorship in design at ETH Zurich. What do you want to bring across to the students? Which concept do you use to pursue teaching activities?

Jonathan Sergison & Stephen Bates: We would like to instil in our students a sense of enquiry. To be curious about the way things are made and to look for solutions in their projects by understanding that there is relevance in looking at existing sets of conditions. This is not a revisionist position but it does recognise that innovation in architecture does not emerge from a lack of familiarity of what already exists. We promote a method of working that we have learnt from the English architects, Alison and Peter Smithson that they called "strategy and detail". This fosters a way of making buildings where one is thinking about concept and how it would be made from the outset. This is not about starting at 1:500 or 1:200 and working to 1:1 but about working at all scales from the beginning.

trans: What is the research area of your chair? How do you incorporate research results into education?

S&B: We do like to see our studio as an experimental studio where we research something new every semester. In one semester we were considering how "repetition" could be employed as a concept at a large urban scale and the way this would translate in making buildings. In another semester the projects explored material intensity. We chose brick as the material because of its flexibility but also its' cultural aspects.

trans: It is not only architecture firms and chairs of architecture who promote developments and trends in architecture. Do students also stimulate architectural education and your architectural work?

S&B: It is certainly true to say that students input has had an influence on our own development as architects. A part of the attraction of teaching has always been the manner in which the exposure to students' ideas influences the way you think. It is hard to cite a very precise example of this but we are convinced that this does happen. Students are not burdened by the influence of the building regula-

tions or planning limitations. They have certain freedoms that do not exist in practice and this can be a good thing in that they can offer new insights. In our teaching these professional responsibilities form a part of our discussions because it is helpful to present a realistic situation in which to design, but it is quite abstract because the students are not meeting with the planning officers or general public in the same way we do as architects.

trans: The faculty of architecture at ETH Zürich perceives itself as one of the leading Schools of Architecture in the world. What is your contribution to this statement?

S&B: We believe that *ETH Zurich* is right to see itself as one of the best schools of architecture in the World. We are the first teachers to be invited to run a course in the recent history of the school who come from the United Kingdom. Our position has certain similarities with the most dominant aspect of Swiss architecture but our own influences are more contested. We come from a more chaotic situation, which requires a greater level of negotiation at both a political and social level. This is a part of the discourse we feel we bring to the school.

trans: Do you know of any circumstances that prevent you from realizing your teaching in an "ideal" way? Do spirit and atmosphere at Höggerberg influence your architectural work? Do you see any advantage in external design studios?

S&B: We have a very different experience to date of teaching than the situation we encounter at *ETH Zurich*, i.e. all our teaching experience has been in the United Kingdom. It would not be possible to suggest an improvement in the set of conditions we have encountered in Switzerland when we compare them to UK experience. So from our point of view it is as good as it could reasonably be.

We do not run an "external" studio so we are not sure what the advantages are. A greater level of convenience for the Professors perhaps. But the distance from the school and wider school culture is disadvantageous to the possibility of an exchange of teaching practice.

trans: Does an “ETH-identity” exist, even though individual chairs of design pursue their own methods?

S&B: From our perspective there is a clearly identifiable “ETH-identity” and the school should be proud of it. Too much variety results in a nice box of chocolates but sometimes you always end up eating the ones you don’t like. We think there is the right level of difference but enough common ground to make for a healthy exchange.

trans: Does the ETH influence Swiss architecture? What about the influence beyond Switzerland?

S&B: It is clear when one talks of contemporary Swiss architecture that almost without exception the significant voices are trained at only one school, *ETH Zurich* and their influence on contemporary European architecture is equalled by no other nation. Enough said!

trans: What is your future vision for architectural education?

The refinement of the position we have tried to articulate above.

Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates are currently Visiting Professors at the Department of Architecture of the *Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich* (2003-2005).

Jonathan Sergison was born in 1964 and graduated from the *Architectural Association*, London in 1989, studying under Rodrigo Perez. He worked as an assistant and subsequently as project architect for David Chipperfield Architects (1986-1987 and 1989-1995) and as assistant and collaborator with Tony Fretton Architects (1993-1995) during which time he was involved in a number of significant arts and cultural projects. In 1996 he established Sergison Bates architects with Stephen Bates.

He has taught at a number of schools of architecture in the UK, including the *University of Nottingham* and the *University of Humberside*. He was Degree unit master at the *University of North London* between 1995-96 and subsequently at the *Architectural Association*, London, in the 1st Year and Diploma school between 1995-1998. He has been Guest Critic at the *University of Kingston* and Tutor in the Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering at the *University of Bath* in 2002.



Stephen Bates, *Kings Cross station*, London, photo.

Stephen Bates was born in 1964. After graduating from the *Royal College of Art* in 1989, under the tutelage of James Gowan and David Chipperfield. He worked in Barcelona for Liebman Villavecchia on housing and cultural projects in the run up to the 1992 *Olympic Games*. Subsequently, as project architect for Bennetts Associates, London (1992-1996), he worked on a number of award winning environmental office buildings. In 1996 he established Sergison Bates architects with Jonathan Sergison.

He has been a Technical Tutor and Guest Critic at a number of schools of architecture in the UK. He was 1st Year unit master at the *Architectural Association*, London between 1996-1998 and External Examiner at *South Bank University*, London between 1999-2003. He was Tutor at the *Architectural Association* from 2001-2003 and in the Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering at the *University of Bath* in 2002.