

# Giancarlo De Carlo and the Question of WHY

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the influence of the Italian architect, writer and educator, Giancarlo De Carlo (1919-2005), on architectural education. As a practitioner and occasional teacher, I propose that De Carlo's critical thinking in the 60's and early 70's should again be used to evaluate, revitalize and re-orient current approaches to preparing students for a changing architecture profession, which is caught within a turbulent economic and ecological climate. Central to De Carlo's life long intellectual and architectural explorations was his question on "the faith in HOW and ignorance of WHY"<sup>1</sup>.

As a founding member of TEAM X in 1954, through the turbulent 1960s and the following decades, De Carlo established himself as an insightful and eloquent critic of architecture as commodity and passing fetish. He was a passionate advocate of the "architecture of resistance", which stands in opposition to the static, authoritarian thinking in architecture and urban design. His long tenure at the Architectural School in Venice and numerous visiting professorships established his reputation as an architecture educator. Most importantly De Carlo started the International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design (ILAUD) as an annual forum for students from different countries to gather in a historical Italian city to research and design, and to critique and communicate.

De Carlo's buildings are products of places and people and are always reflective of the project's social, cultural and political circumstances. The essence of De Carlo's built work can best be summarized by the

official citation of the Royal Institute of British Architects when he received the Royal Gold Medal in 1993. It commended "the way he has succeeded in procuring masterfully conceived and executed buildings and urban settings by a process nourished by an absolute commitment to society and democracy"<sup>2</sup>.

## Current Crisis

Over the past decades, architects have been comfortably producing buildings for the consumers and for institutions with accumulated wealth. Architecture schools fulfilled the demand of labor with graduates skilled in visualization tools and seemingly endless computer generated designs. Though the acceptance of climate changes has introduced sustainability design into the practices and curriculums, there is still an unfocused response to the escalating environmental challenges. Equally missing is the sense of social responsibilities among most architects and schools (the Rural Studio being a clear exception) with minimum concerns for the underserved sectors of society.

With the collapse of the dominant un-regulated market economy in 2009, and accompanied by a growing wariness of environmental disasters, architects and architectural educators are confronted with mounting concerns about the role and relevancy of the profession. High unemployment among architects recalled earlier recessions which altered the practice, except this time the future is even less certain. In addition, advancing technologies in design and documentation are changing the production of architecture both in the speed of delivery and the impact on the built environment.

I see three basic challenges that confront the architecture profession and architectural education in the coming decades. First and foremost, the architect must investigate the adaptation of the built environment to the impacts of climate change and the reduction of a building's carbon footprint. Second, the current economic recession exposed the fallacy of an absolute market-driven economy, and the profession must adapt to a more turbulent global economic climate with creative models of practice. Third, the profession must learn to harvest technological advances without losing architecture's connection to people and places and the necessary deliberate pace of explorations.

Interestingly, the current time of anxiety draws comparison with the period before and after 1968. Alexander Tzonis in 1972 wrote,

"This recent crisis has caused more desperation and more surprise than any previous ones. Less than 10 years ago there seemed to be no indication that there was anything wrong with the profession and, at first glance, no need for new directions and alternative proposals for change"<sup>3</sup>.

Another indication of change of value is found in the current exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Titled "Small Scale Big Changes: New Architecture of Social Engagement", it perhaps signals a shift away from the focuses on star architects and technological manipulations to a revival of architecture's moral engagement.

In this respect a look back at the period after 1968 might shed light on strategies applicable for the current situation. In particular, De Carlo's methods of inquiry are especially relevant.

### Resistance and Disorder

De Carlo studied structural engineering before the Second World War and was later active in the resistance movement. He graduated from architecture school after the war and immediately associated himself with the progressive movement in Italian architecture. Against the rationalism of the post-war International Style, he championed humanistic approaches and regionalism through his built work, his writings and exhibitions such as the 1951 "Spontaneous Architecture Exhibition" in Milan.

Although he was a member of CIAM (Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne), he opposed the

growing rigid methodologies of the Modern Movement and its rejection of the heritage of the past. In his view "the main fault of the Modern Movement wasn't so much that it was permissive but rather it wanted to control everything, even things that architecture and town planning can't control"<sup>4</sup>. Instead of the abstraction of "space" and "time", he believed architecture should express what Aldo Van Eyck called "place" and "occasion". In 1959, together with a group of younger architects (Bakema, Smithsons, Van Eyck, Candillis, Woods, and others), they formed TEAM X "because of mutual realization of the inadequacies of the processes of architectural thought which they had inherited from the modern movement as a whole, but more important, each sensed that the other had already found some way toward a new beginning"<sup>5</sup>.

De Carlo's anti-authoritarian attitudes were heightened in the years leading up to the 1968 student unrest throughout Europe and the United States and were expressed through his writings and editorials in magazines such as *Casabella*. He was the curator of the 1968 Triennale of Milan that focused on processes and issues, and featured works by members of Team X. However he cancelled the exhibit before it opened after failing to negotiate successfully with counter protesters and the police.



Figure 1: De Carlo (right in dark jacket), Milan, 1968

His provocative questioning about the status and practice of architecture intensified after 1968 and was exemplified by publications such as "An Architecture of Participation"<sup>6</sup> and "Legitimizing Architecture: The Revolt and Frustration of the School of Architecture"<sup>7</sup>. The influences of De Carlo's criti-

cisms and analysis during the early 70's could be found in the writings of Tafuri, Sennett, and Tzonis<sup>8</sup>.

De Carlo's built work provided an alternative to the stylistic pendulum and theoretical projects during the 70's and 80's. His commitment to the sense of place in balance with the pressure of urbanization was exemplified in his thoughtful master plan for the historic town of Urbino, Italy. One of his projects in Urbino, the re-inhabitation of an existing convent compound into the Il Magistero, the University's arts building, showed the sensitive yet inventive approach to reuse of existing and historical resources. The process De Carlo instigated in the design for the Matteotti workers housing in Terni, Italy, reflected his belief in active democratic participation and equity in architecture. These three themes of place, reuse and participation were threads weaving through De Carlo's works and theories.

### Searching for Answers - ILAUD

In the aftermath of the 1968 upheaval, De Carlo summarized his critique on education in an essay in the 1969 issue of the "Harvard Educational Review: Architecture and Education". He started by stating his life long principle. "In a period of crisis of values like the one which we are going through at present, we cannot deal with the problems of "how to" without first posing the problems of why"<sup>9</sup>. Similar themes such as decentralized educational structure, cities as learning laboratories, democratic participation and non-institutional design of the physical environment became framework for his later approach to education.

The culmination of his inquiry on alternatives to the established architecture education models and publications were two parallel initiatives in the mid 1970's. He became the editor of the magazine *Spazio e Societa* with a focus on presenting projects and researches set within their social, political, and economic contexts. In 1974, De Carlo founded the International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design (ILAUD) with its first residential course in 1976 at Urbino, Italy.

As Alison Smithson pointed out, ILAUD was the logical extension of Team X "enlarged to include new voices, open to universities and students, combining the moral legacy of CIAM and the energies of Team X"<sup>10</sup>. From 1976 to 2003, over thirty architec-

ture schools from around the world participated in ILAUD. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of California, Berkeley, were the early representatives from North America. Later participants included University of California, Los Angeles, University of Montreal, University of Toronto, and University of Pennsylvania.

Evolving since the 60's, De Carlo's perspective on education can be found in his description of ILAUD's objectives:

"to explore new methodologies and design techniques focusing on those problems that in contemporary architectural research and practice appear the most complex and pressing;

to promote contacts between teachers and students in various countries in order to start up a debate on architectural questions that seem of fundamental importance and generally significant for every country in the world for their social and cultural reflexes;

to offer a group of Universities in various countries the opportunity to compare their respective ideas and trends on the problem of architecture and urban design teaching"<sup>11</sup>.

True to De Carlo's proposition for continuous critical analysis, the methodologies of ILAUD evolved over the course of the next twenty-five years. Acknowledging that direct participation by the public was not always possible, but that an understanding of the context of any given architectural intervention is critical, participants in ILAUD used "reading" in which marks left by social transformations in our physical space are identified and recomposed so as to make them relevant for us today. Similarly, to promote choices and multiple possibilities, "tentative design" and not specific solution was presented for critique and analysis. Instead of design as purely an intellectual investigation, De Carlo used design to explore issues and to facilitate "indirect participation".

### Where Do You Stand

Up until his death in 2005, De Carlo used his writings to relentlessly challenge architects to question the moral legitimacy of architecture, to engage with public concerns and to embrace the cultural characters of places. John McKean observed that De Carlo, "with his focus, therefore, always on the process, always asking the "why?" questions to open up rather than close down issues, architec-

ture and urban design is simply the central element in an ongoing process"<sup>12</sup>.

Applying De Carlo's critical thinking to the current challenges for architectural education, I suggest that educators ask how we can prepare students for a profession in transition, and what skills and values should be taught so students can adapt to changing conditions. This crisis gives us the opportunity to rethink our approaches to educate future architects and environmental activists. I strongly believe that besides teaching students "HOW" to design - creative thinking, one must also give the students the skill of critical thinking - the intellectual vigor to ask "WHY".

With the three challenges stated earlier in the paper, we should encourage students to ask the following questions:

WHY should we continue to deplete natural resources to expand the built environment? Are we adding values or simply abiding capital accumulations? Why are we still using building systems and practices that further environmental damages?

WHY are we producing anonymous architecture for the global market while marginalizing alternate place based designs? Will renew interest in the re-use of urban structures and new models of regional economic growth require new models of practice? Can alternate models of practice which balance local versus global be possible?

WHY the urgency and demand on expediency fed by advance communication mediums and computer technologies? Are these means simply speeding up our consumption cycles or allowing society to be more efficient in our use of resources? Can technologies be harnessed to allow greater communications between producers and users?

Using design to explore answers to these questions, students will need to understand the political/cultural/economic context of architecture through cross discipline studies, and thus be able to question the appropriateness of a given design intervention. They must have the imaginations and technical knowledge to explore multiple solutions to the problem so as to investigate the consequences and possibilities. They should understand the implications of how and why resources are al-

located. The students have to work collaboratively in analyzing the problems and in the design processes. They have to be critical in their analysis, to be creative in putting forth options for analysis and to communicate clearly their positions.

Thinking critically and creatively is perhaps the most important skill for architecture students. It will prepare them for a future with many possibilities and hurdles. It also transcends architecture and can be used by those who enter other professions but hopefully remain an advocate for an equitable and sustainable built world. An evidence of such cross discipline application was found in a recent article in the New York Times paper. It reported that more and more MBA programs stress "that students needed to learn how to think critically and creatively" and "they needed to learn how to approach problems from many perspectives and to combine various approaches to find innovative solutions"<sup>13</sup>.

Hopefully architecture will emerge from the current turmoil with renewed commitment to its humanistic and ecological responsibilities. De Carlo was never a pessimist. Through periods of changes and upheavals, he always believed in the contributions of architecture. In accepting the Royal Institute of British Architect's Gold Medal, De Carlo declared

"Perhaps organizing and giving form to three-dimensional space will become architecture's raison d'être once more. Perhaps the capacity of space to become a place, to be generous in terms of human use and stimulating in terms of human experience will become again the measure of architectural quality"<sup>14</sup>.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Giancarlo De Carlo, "Legitimizing Architecture," *Forum* 23, (1972).
- 2 Royal Institute of British Architects: <http://www.architecture.com/Awards/RoyalGoldMadel/175Exhibition/WinnerBiogs/1990s/1993.aspx>.
- 3 Alexander Tzonis, *Towards A Non Oppressive Environment* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1972), 13.
- 4 Francesco Karrer, "Landscape with figures", *Spazio e Societa* 41, (January-March 1988).
- 5 Alison Smithson et al, *Team 10 Primer* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1968), 3.
- 6 Giancarlo De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, (South Melbourne, Australia: Royal Institute of Architects, 1972).
- 7 Giancarlo De Carlo, "Legitimizing Architecture", *Forum* 23, (1972).
- 8 See Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia - Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge: The

MIT Press, 1976); Alexander Tzonis, *Towards A Non Oppressive Environment* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1972); Richard Sennett, *Use of Disorder* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

9 Giancarlo De Carlo, "How/Why to Build School Buildings", in *Harvard Educational Review* (1969), 12-34.

10 Mirko Zardini, web site of Team10 Online, <http://www.team10online.org/team10/meetings/1974-2004-ilaud.htm>.

11 "International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design," *Report of the 1st Residential Course*, (Urbino 1976), 5.

12 John McKean, *Giancarlo De Carlo - Layered Places* (Stuttgart/London: Edition Axel Menges, 2004), 115.

13 Lane Wallace, "Multicultural Critical Theory. At B-School?", *The New York Times* (January 10, 2010).

14 "De Carlo's transformation," RIBA Gold Medal address, *The Architectural Review* 194, n. 1160, (October 1993), 74-77.

**Correction Notice:** Following the print publication of the proceedings book in which this article appeared, it was noted that the author's name was incorrect. This has since been updated and this can now be considered the version of record.