

Learning From ...: Site-Specific Education in a Global Context

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Analyzing the intellectual debate at Cornell School of Architecture in the 1970s, Sébastien Marot coined the term “manifeste situé” to describe three publications: *Berlin: A Green Archipelago* in 1977, *Collage City* and *Delirious New York* in 1978. These publications completed a cycle that began ten years earlier at Yale University, where architecture education departed from the modernist canon to root itself in the reading of the vernacular commercial environment.

Charles W. Moore’s agenda when he took over the School of Architecture at Yale in the 1960s was to bring design teaching outside the studio, reacting to beaux-arts atavism that survived modernism, where design is taught in-vitro. Initiated by investigating the New Haven social and urban conditions, this pedagogical project culminated with Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s urban design-inspired studio in Las Vegas in 1968 and Levittown in 1970. These systematic explorations of America’s backyard, through sketching, painting, photographing, filming, and reading, aimed to shift design education’s focus toward political space and away from architectural forms. The ambition was to address the rapidly developing problems of the urban environment and relate architecture to a broader culture. Within this context, Venturi and Scott-Brown’s seminal publication, *Learning from Las Vegas*, would redefine architectural education.

Fast forward fifty years, our paper examines the relevance of this education model in a Sino-American institution. We explore how working with existing settings can make architectural education more relevant and engage students effectively in China’s increasingly homogenous educational landscape. We question whether architecture can remain political in this context and how to redefine the notion of context as a design mimic in global practices. Drawing parallels between the 1970s US education context and present-day China, we adopt a foreign perspective to examine the relationship between architecture education, politics, architectural canons, and vernacular landscapes

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2006, Mr. Xi Jinping, at that time the party secretary of Zhejiang province, delivered a keynote speech at the signing ceremony of cooperation between Kean University in Union, New Jersey, and Wenzhou University in Zhejiang, China, for the establishment of Wenzhou-Kean University¹. It was the first public Sino-American university in China and the third Sino-American campus after Duke Kunshan University and New York University Shanghai. Six years later, the first building broke ground in Wenzhou’s southern urban fringes. During the same period, Kean University reached out to Michael Graves to set up their new architectural program and set up in 2014 the Michael Graves College, including the existing school of design and the newly created school of public architecture, with the ambition to “intensively utilize the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area and the Wenzhou region of China (...) as a pedagogical component of the curriculum.”² The cooperation between Zhejiang and New Jersey found its roots back in 1981,³ with the signing of the sister state-province relationship, following the Reform and Opening-up, and the academic exchanges between Zhejiang and Kean University started at the end of the 1990s, with administrators from Zhejiang getting trained in public administration program at Kean University, at the peak of the optimistic globalization.

When the architecture program started in 2017 in Wenzhou, the development of an American Architecture School in China had a very different meaning than in early 2000, and the localization of the curriculum became the central pedagogical issue. Moreover, within this highly sensitive political context, how to engage with the local problematics: environmental questions, urbanization, migrating population, and translating an American academic heritage for Chinese condition while preserving the specificity of its content⁴. How to translate a nomadic knowledge into a situated one?

In American architectural academic history, the 1960s and 1970s saw the mutation from a ubiquitous knowledge rooted in the Beaux-Arts and the Modernist agenda to a site-specific one, particularly in such places as Yale University under the leadership of Charles Moore or at Cornell University with Colin Rowe and

Oswald Mathias Ungers. Driven by the rise of political activism on the campuses, the interest in community-related issues on the one hand, and the critique of the modernist abstraction on the other hand, architectural education left the studio's comfort. It brought faculties in students on site, and vernacular architecture replaced the vehicular language of international architecture as a new canon. These studios led to a series of key publications, from *Leaning from Las Vegas* in the early 1970s to *Delirious New York* and *Collage City* at the decade's end. In his introduction to *The City in the City: Berlin: A Green Archipelago*, Sébastien Marot calls this "theoretical-literary genre" "site-specific manifesto," broadening the more postmodern term of "retroactive manifesto" coined by Rem Koolhaas and relating these publications to site-specific art, itself a product of the 1970s critique of siteless modernist art⁵.

We could extend this definition to the academic context that gave birth to these publications and talk about a site-specific education born from the 1960s political contestation, the critique of modernism. Our paper looks at the genealogy of this trend in the first part, from the tenure of Charles Moore at Yale and the American experience of Alvin Boyarsky in Chicago to the teaching of Rem Koolhaas at Harvard in the 1990s, and is questioning the political agenda and the pedagogical relevance of this heritage in the twenty-first century. In the second part, we are looking at how we could learn from this heritage, focusing on the development of the Michael Graves College School of Public Architecture in China from 2017 to 2022 and how the political ambition of this tradition can be translated into a different context, or how this particular tradition can address the question of American architectural education in China.

LEARNING FROM: ARCHITECTURE PEDAGOGY AND POLITICS AT YALE IN THE LATE 1960S AND EARLY 1970S.

In the political turmoil of the 1960s, American architecture schools were strongly marked by students' political activism and contestation, such as the civil rights movements, the protest against the war in Vietnam, and the rise of a new feminist movement⁶. These movements led to a new focus on social and political issues and students' interest in the universities' neighborhoods and surrounding communities. When Charles Moore took the chairmanship of the Yale School of Art and Architecture in this context, he steered away the pedagogical agenda from the modernist emphasis on shape and composition as it has been implemented by Paul Rudolf "toward a concern for the usefulness of architecture in relation to the problem of life in our less-advanced areas, in our cities, and in our backwater locales."⁷ Moore's pedagogy was as much an adaptation to the political context as well as the continuation of his interest in architecture as place-making, "the ordered extension of man's idea about himself in specific location."⁸ During his tenure as the Architecture department chair at Berkeley in the early 1960s, Moore developed what he called "a theory of place," notably influenced by John Brinckerhoff Jackson's human geography. In

1962, Moore co-wrote with Donlyn Lydon, Sim Van der Ryn, and Patrick J. Quinn his seminal article, "Toward Making Spaces," in Jackson's own magazine *Landscape*, where his opposition between spaces and places anticipated the debate around context and neo-regionalism of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the pages of Yales's journal *Perspecta*⁹. In his 1965 essay "You Have to Pay for Public Life,"¹⁰ Moore took Los Angeles as a clinical case study of post-war urban America, where suburban sprawl, car transportation, and amusement parks redefined the very notion of city and public space, laying out the foundation for the Las Vegas studio a couple of years later. His interest in roadside architecture expanded his focus on traditional vernacular construction while learning from J.B. Jackson's analysis of the vernacular landscape¹¹. During his tenure at Yale, between 1965 and 1970, Moore had students engaging with New Haven's urban and historical conditions, reacting both to the beaux-arts in-vitro studio model and modernism's ubiquitous architecture. Students were "encouraged to spend time outside the studio, exploring New Heaven's railways, dockyards, factories, urban neighborhoods, and industrial edges, as well as the vernacular and monumental architecture of New England and farther afield. Looking, sketching, painting, photographing, filming, and reading broadly were considered essential components of the core education of the architect."¹² The commercial vernacular was where Moore's pedagogy's two directions crossed: the concern for social issues and the fascination with new technologies, particularly those related to the rising computer sciences and visual communication¹³. Moore's own interest in supergraphics influenced the curriculum, with graphic designer Barbara Stauffacher assigning students to transform space through large-scale graphic composition¹⁴, reminiscent of Charles Moore's teacher in Princeton, Jean Labadut¹⁵. Within the political agitation of the late 1960s, Moore supported student-led activist organizations engaged with community-design and public education and students' highly political publication *Novum Organum*¹⁶. In this context, his absence of restriction in teaching, his broadening of the curriculum to computers and social sciences, and his interdisciplinary engagement with other design majors, such as Graphic Design, reflect his political insight and his pedagogical agenda.

Between 1968 and 1970, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown studios made the best of the academic freedom and the pedagogical culture laid down by Moore, from its interest in vernacular commercial landscape to the relation between architecture and graphics, while stepping aside from the gravitas of Yales' political climate¹⁷. The studios were nurtured by Denise Scott Brown's training in urban planning at Penn University, where she got familiar with the sociological work of Herbert Gans, and the environmental pioneer research of Ian McHarg¹⁸. While a young faculty at Penn, Denise Scott Brown met J.B. Jackson, whose passion for the vernacular landscape will have on her the same impact he had on Charles Moore¹⁹. The methodology developed in the studios combines taxonomies of the landscape elements, comparative studies with canonical urban models, and documentation methods borrowed from pop

art. Besides the claim that they focus more on formal analysis and the critique of their lack of social concern, their research included an in-depth series of interviews with local inhabitants and linked together architecture to the broader culture²⁰.

The success of the studio led to a following up “Learning from” studio in Levittown and to a whole series of publications such as “Learning from Pop,” “Learning from Hamburgers,” “Learning from Brutalism,” “Learning from Philadelphia,” “Learning from Lutyens” up to the Spanish book “Learning from Everything.”²¹ The original text in 1968 and its publication in a book, including studio output in 1972²², was widely commented on both in the general media²³ and in architecture academia as it was analyzed by Valéry Didelon²⁴ and was considered by many, including Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, as the beginning of the post-modern movement. Following Moore’s critique of architectural modernism, Venturi and Scott-Brown would become the heralds of site-informed architecture, converging with the rising contextualism and neo-regionalism trends that would soon come to dominate architectural discourse in the early 1980s. If Venturi and Scott-Brown’s project claims to be revolutionary, it has been quickly criticized as being Counter-revolutionary, to use Robert Goodman’s critique in his 1971 book “After the Planners”²⁵ or as an anti-utopian New Utopia for Kenneth Frampton. Thirty years later, Valéry Didelon called it a conservative revolution²⁶, as it mainly led to justifying the status quo. The main critique which could be addressed to the “Learning from” project is not its focus on the existing condition or the mundane commercial environment but to look at the vernacular as an extension of the architectural canon, in other words, integrating architecture without architects as a reservoir of forms and ideas, rather than using this knowledge from the field to challenge the very way architects think and design. To quote Jeremy Till, “The title alone suggests an active intention for the high to engage productively with the low, notwithstanding the fact that Las Vegas is not quite normal in the first instance. What happened was that the imagery of the Las Vegas Strip was seized for its aesthetic and formal substance” “In the end, the process is one of reification, both in the original sense of the word—turning something into matter—but also in the Marxist interpretation—that this procedure is also one of commodification. The every day is raided for its visual stimulus.”²⁷

LEARNING FROM LEARNING

During the same historical sequence, Alvin Boyarsky, the then associate dean at the College of Architecture and the Arts at UIC, published *Chicago a la Carte, the city as an energy system*,²⁸ based on his collection of postcards of Chicago retracing the industrialization of the city from 1902 onward. Boyarsky, influenced by his education at Cornell under Colin Rowe and his experience as a faculty member in the Bartlett school with Reyner Banham, fostered in this publication the urban sensibility of the former and the interest in the industrial imagery of the latter. As Igor Marjanovic explains²⁹, Boyarsky’s collection of vintage postcards bridged the early modernist fascination for

the industrial vernacular and the late 1960s interest in urban history, themes which would structure his design studios, both at the Bartlett and in Chicago. However, his reading of the city went beyond the formal and artistic aspects of Rowe to embrace its political, economic, and social aspects, influenced by the political climate following 1968. His pedagogical position, bridging the experimental avant-garde and the urban interest of the early postmodern, will be implemented in his International Institute of Design summer schools between 1971 and 1972 and during his tenure at the Architectural Association from 1972 onward. In 1972, the presentation of Rem Koolhaas Berlin’s wall research and his subsequent design proposal on London exemplified Boyarsky’s pedagogy.

In 1963, as he was appointed professor at the TU Berlin, Oswald Mathias Ungers developed a series of studios treating Berlin as an urban laboratory. Ungers’ pedagogical project inspired Koolhaas to join him at Cornell, where he taught in 1971. Koolhaas’ sojourn in the US, in 1971 and 1972, led him to combine Boyarsky’s interest in local history through postcard collection with Ungers’s treatment of the city as a laboratory, leading a few years later to his collaboration with the latter on a Cornell summer design studio centered around Berlin: *The City Within the City*³⁰, and a year later, to his magnum opus, *Delirious New York*³¹. Koolhaas’ collaboration with Ungers informed his own design studio twenty years later at Harvard GSD, where he achieved the Venturian project with his Summa, *Mutations, Harvard Project on the City*³², and the two following opus *Great Leap Forward*³³ and *The Harvard Guide to Shopping*³⁴. From New York to Berlin, passing by Shenzhen, Atlanta, Lagos, and Singapore, Koolhaas drained the recipe developed by Venturi, Scott-Brown twenty years later without departing from its ideological premise: a conservative justification of existing conditions, an endless and hegemonic extension of the architectural canon, and the treatment of the vernacular as a reservoir for architectural ideas, forms, and materials.

With *Delirious New York* and *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi and Koolhaas left us the most famous retroactive manifestos, or what Sebastien Marot calls “site-specific manifestos,”³⁵ but at the cost of the ambitious pedagogical projects set up by Moore, Boyarsky, and Ungers.

USES AND ABUSES OF CONTEXT

The subtext of this pedagogical fable is the rise of the notion of context as an answer to the modernist project. Inspired by literary study, the idea of context was imported into architecture in the 1950s to describe the relationship between a building and a particular historical and urban condition, similar to a word in a sentence and a sentence in a book. If for Adrian Forty, the architectural interpretation of context is credited to Ernesto Rogers’ “Ambiente” or “Preesistenza ambientale,”³⁶ for Valéry Didelon, the first occurrence is to be credited to Venturi in his 1950s Master Thesis “Context in Architectural Composition.”³⁷



Figure 1. Wangzhai Village Preservation Plan. Image credit.

Canonized by Rowe in the 1960s in Cornell, it became a trope of postmodern production and a design gimmick at the end of 20th-century and early 21st-century global architecture. Similar to the conceptualization of the vernacular promoted by Venturi and Koolhaas, the notion of context reified the local condition into a commodity at the service of place marketing or populist political agenda. Analyzing critical regionalism, a concept which followed a fate parallel to Learning from, as well as the notion of concept, Carmen Popescu talks about the flattening of history³⁸, a supplanting of time with space, appealing both to the myth of the timeless in modern architecture and the populism of vernacular sentimentalism. While attempting to address the crisis of meaning brought by modern architecture and the homogenization brought by globalization, critical regionalism, or “contemporary regionalism”³⁹ as Keith Eggner calls it, romanticizes the vernacular and absorbs it into a global image defined by a neo-imperialist architectural discourse or a local chauvinist one.

The idea of learning from, or situated discipline, not as a reification of the vernacular but as it was established by Moore, the notion of *Preesistenza ambientale* as described by Rogers and interpreted by Vittorio Gregotti in his seminal essay *The Territory of Architecture*⁴⁰, and the critical version of regionalism explored by Lewis Mumford in his 1941 essay *The south in Architecture*⁴¹ might help us to redefine these notions in a 21st-century

context, beyond the parochialism of the postmodern moment, from Venturi to Koolhaas.

Emergent notions might help us to redefine what Donna Haraway calls “Situated Knowledge.”⁴² The concept of “Cosmopolitics,” as developed by Isabelle Stengers⁴³ or Bruno Latour⁴⁴, might help us to redefine the relationship between architecture and the built environment and design practice with global challenges beyond the local/global dialectics, as Albena Yaneva has shown in the eponymous book⁴⁵. French Geographer Augustin Berque, in his interpretation of the notion of landscape⁴⁶, brings the conceptual tools to bridge human and natural history, while the anthropologist Phillipe Descola interprets the Levi-Straussian structuralism tradition to deconstruct the opposition of nature and culture⁴⁷.

AN AMERICAN SCHOOL IN CHINA

With this pedagogical and intellectual legacy, the architecture program at Wenzhou-Kean University in China was established in 2017. The ambition for the School of Public Architecture on the Chinese campus of the Michael Graves College, Kean University, was “to be a ‘first-person’ education: learning by

direct engagement, observation, documentation, and analysis of the places, spaces, buildings, and experiences that form the built environment – and through discussion with the general public that uses them.” as the founding dean David Mohney describes it⁴⁸. As such, the school has aspired to engage with local conditions, both physical and social, while avoiding both the neo-imperialism of the discipline and the regionalist reification of the context. Learning from Sciences and Technology Studies, Haraway’s “situated knowledge” describes this form of partial and site-specific perspective, a “particular and specific embodiment, (...). In this way, we might become answerable for what we learn how to see.”⁴⁹

To develop this pedagogical idea and simultaneously explore the political dimension of the public mission of the school in a diplomatically sensitive context, we took the given conditions as a laboratory, following Ungers’ Experiments in Berlin. The campus was established in Wenzhou, Zhejiang, 400 kilometers south of Shanghai. Located in the city’s urban fringes, ten miles south of the historical core, the campus sits on three historical settlements, two of which have been preserved thus far. From year one, the neighboring village Wangzhai has been used to support the students’ learning, having them document the vernacular architecture to learn about architecture and construction, using it as a studio site and as a support for one-to-one installation. This led the first cohort to develop a research project based on the village, working with faculties on historical investigation, photogrammetry, and ethnographical studies. In 2020, students and faculties were asked to work on the campus extension plan for Wangzhai Village, and in 2021 to do a preservation project for the village’s urban fabric.

In studying the very localized villages and conditions around our immediate campus area, students have also been able to tap into broader issues that affect China as a whole. A pertinent question tied to the issue of rapid urbanization, and the transition from an agrarian society, has been that of large-scale demolition. This process has dramatically impacted Chinese society and has mainly been felt at the fringes of expanding urban areas, affecting migrant workers and dispossessed farmers. Much of our pedagogy has focused on this issue, reworking and investigating the traditional divisions between town and country while tapping into the collective experience of such significant and rapid transformations. In this context, students must think beyond the building, from the scale of the household to the province.

EPILOGUE

In the fall of 2001, a month after the September 11 attacks, which contributed strongly to the global political instability of the early 21st century, a retrospective exhibition on the pedagogical and design work of Charles Moore opened at Yale. Titled “Architecture or Revolution” and curated by Eve Blau, it replaced Moore’s project within the political context of the time. Twenty more years later, there is still much to learn from Moore’s Yale, both for its innovation and experimentation and its political dimension and engagement with the local condition. Facing

environmental, cultural, technological, and political challenges will require students and instructors to dig into the complexity of the place.

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