Arts in society

Big shed syndrome

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The New School has got a big shed (murmurs of envious congratulation). Actually, it's not really a shed, but a former warehouse. Still, it gives them two huge bays of clear industrial floorspace, under shallow-pitched glazed roofs, with doors back and sides big enough to shunt an articulated truck in and out. And across the street front, there are two storeys of very plain office space, under a flat roof (some kind of pent-thing lurks behind the parapet), with strip windows running right across, and a very slightly projecting doorframe. The flat stuccoed surface is a dead chalky white and it might just be architecture of a low-profile sort—except that who'd ever notice one way or the other, down there at the junction of Berkeley and Nebraska in a forgotten pocket of industrial grotto halfway between the Santa Monica beaches and the University of California Los Angeles campus?

They are noticing already. The New School is a breakaway group of architecture faculty and students from Cal State Poly at Pomona. Given the prestige that new schools enjoy both in architecture and in California, it is going to get visited—and envied, because, in the architecture school back East, a Big Shed is a hot property at present.

The first clearly recorded outbreak of the present epidemic was around ten years ago, when Big Jim McCullough (the head of Bennington) and a fact-finding team of architecture faculty and students from MIT on a tour of New England art departments, decided that it was the storage spaces under the arts building at Brandeis they ought to emulate on their own campus, not what was visible above ground. And the most closely studied case has recently wracked the School of Environment Studies at University College, London, where I teach.

What makes the idea of an architecture-free building so infectiously attractive is, of course, its freedom from architecture. It means that you don't find yourself competing with somebody else's aesthetic ego-trips, which may be anathema to your own. The idea is irrestibly attractive, except for one thing—an architecture school's building (ditto for art and design) is a public statement about what's taught inside, and an architecture-free solution is a profession of no-faith in your own discipline and curriculum. It's a problem that is unique to these studies: schools of dentistry don't have buildings that commit them to attitudes on fluoridation, say.

But the architecture of an architecture school will inevitably be read as so directly indicative of the intellectual content that Paul Rudolph's 1963 Arts and Architecture Building at Yale was described as "a curriculum cast in situ." Every detail of its ridge-hacked concrete surface was scrutinised for educational implications. In a sense, this was realistic. The interior seemed to be arranged like some sort of theatre around the "crit pit," where the high ceremony of the "jury," or final review of a student's design, was conducted. But after Rudolph's departure, this spectacle of visual and primal dominance over students' work in public became less important, and the case was reversed.

What had been a confession of faith now became a confounded nuisance. The great interior spaces filled up with do-it-yourself privacy screens and other structures. Finally the whole thing was put to the torch in a fit of student rage about something else. Frankly, my own sympathies are with the privacy-seekers, if not the arsonists. But it's what you might call an unintended sympathy: we have been through at least over Wates House, the proposed new building for Environmental Studies.

We lumbered Anthony Cox, the architect, with the advice of a representative/participatory body, in the name of the Expanded Wates House Committee. The scheme on which building work has finally started is, after all the discussion, nearly a Big Shed—though this still does not dispose of one painful part of the problem: what the building looks like. On the site of the old Endsleigh Hotel (immediately behind Friends' House on Euston Square), we shall erect something that looks remarkably like a cut-price version of the old Endsleigh Hotel.

There are quite convincing reasons why this should be so, given our human and financial resources, the nature of the site, and the legal restrictions framing it. The result is neither a profession of faith nor a new aesthetic strategy. It is rather, a resounding admission that anyone who hopes to build must acquiesce in the status quo. It neither says that we believe in Architecture with a capital A, nor that we repudiate aesthetic ego-trips. It says that we accept the situation where an architect is a kind of marriage-broker between a client's needs (however expressed) and a whole variety of external constraints.

For the constraints on our situation prevent any messing about with double-height studios and mezzanines and other architectural fancies, that are presently making life difficult in art and design studios around the globe. (Harvard is now stuck with a design school consisting entirely of mezzanine galleries, if you can believe that.) All we shall get will be standard single-height floorspace, which we can dispose of as we like, Big Shed style. To some extent, this is a relief. We couldn't even begin to agree to anything else. But there are also those among us (besides me) who actively believe that this is right.

For one thing, we saw what happened at Yale (and, to a more muted degree, at Central Poly, London). For the other thing, we saw what happened to us in arguing about what sort of building we should have. The argument must have had something to do with environmental education than the building itself. Well! A Big Shed interior, with almost nothing fixed, ensures that the argument must continue. We have willed a building in which the position of no internal wall (well, almost none) can be blamed on outside force known. We have insisted that the interior be at our disposal. There have certainly been ructions whenever a plan has been posted up that shows any interior partitions at all, even when they are annotated "for costing purposes only." We have created a situation where the interior must always be in a state of existential flux. Thus, if a partition is not moved from time to time, then the school community is not exercising its collective responsibility to growth and change. But whenever a partition is moved, then it must mean that the minority interest is strong-armed by bigger battalions within the school. The weaker don't go to the wall. The wall moves on them.

All this differs from any other organisation rearranging its spaces only in one aspect. It's a special social respect—that we are supposed to be experts in the arrangement of space, its human use, perception, social cost, cultural consequences, and all the rest of it. That's our business, staff and students together. We shall be laying it on the line as members of the internal community, committing ourselves and others to spatial decisions that help some and harm some. It's going to be hell in there: an endless Synanon game, with the state of play recorded in breeze blocks and plaster. Perhaps some faint divination of such drastic group therapies to come may account for the fact that the New School doesn't really make significant use of its own Big Shed. Instead of spontaneous seminars and autonomous work groups camping in their nooks, the Shed has been made into a series of smooth uncluttered floors, the state of play when I was there appeared to be that most of the drawing boards had been squashed into the old offices on the street front, and seminars tended to happen on a small gallery hard up under the roof. And this in the home town of Synanon!

So the freedoms of the Big Shed are a utopian illusion? No, they are as real as they ever were. But the price of that freedom may be too high to pay on a day-to-day, for-ever-and-ever basis. I hope that at least we will be able to bear the psychological wear and tear involved, because the educational yield could be enormous, and continuous. But what may happen, of course, is that we decide that we would rather learn the one thing that can only be learned once from any one building, and hand the whole problem over to an architect to be solved "once and for all." We might then, indeed, have is that architects uniquely do that other sort of thing. But only, those around the school at the time would learn it first hand as lived experience.