

Theorists versus Pragmatists: Heading the School of Architecture

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Abstract

The argument for who will be most suitable for the role of the Head of Architecture School has become necessary after studies show that most highly rated schools of architecture in the United States of America prefer to engage the services of notable industry practitioners rather than academics as deans or heads .i.e. pragmatists rather than theorists. This study focuses on who between the pragmatists or the theorists is more suitable to act as the head of the school of architecture. The pragmatists are architects engaged in full time professional practice often with little or no inclinations towards research or further academic pursuits beyond the pre-requisite Master of Architecture degrees. Theorists on the other hand are considered academics with strong research interests and pursuits, most of whom go on to acquire PhDs or other terminal degrees in specialized areas of architecture, the built environment and related disciplines and may go on to become full professors of architecture. The study is based on a survey of 180 students of architecture in the undergraduate program and 66 students in the post graduate program. Questionnaires were used to inquire about students' preference between theorists and pragmatists for the position of head of school. The results show that majority of undergraduate students would prefer theorists as head of schools whereas amongst post graduate students the decision was split

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between those who prefer theorists and those who prefer pragmatists. The study reveals certain dynamics and disparities in preferences between the undergraduate and post graduate programs worth investigating and a need to re-evaluate suitability for headship at these two levels.

Keywords: Theorists, Pragmatists, Head of School, Architectural Education, Educational Administration

INTRODUCTION

Research about criteria and eligibility to be admitted into schools of architecture has recently gained ground (Doble & Palmer 1998, Dolke-Ashok & Sharma-Rajiv 1975, Goldschmidt et al 2000, Olweny 2008), while the question of who is eligible or qualified to teach design studio is also another aspect of architectural education research that has sparked interest (Chen and Heylighen 2006). However, the question of who is eligible or qualified to head a school of architecture is an aspect that still requires more research. In this paper, the focus is on the suitability for the role of the head of school of architecture, pitting the academic-architect or theorist against the pragmatist or practicing architect. The term theorist here constitutes educators or scholars who contribute or have contributed to architectural education in the area of teaching, research and publications, while pragmatist is used to describe an architect in full practice concerned with proffering practical solutions to problems related to the built environment. This comparison comes on the back of the increasingly demanding roles of the head of architecture schools, their challenges and the skills and qualifications they require to effectively carry out this role.

The term Head of School will be used in a generic sense within the context of the paper. As different terms are used in institutions in different countries or based on the systems run by different institutions. There are three typical systems used in most institutions under which architectural education is organized; these are the faculty, school or department. Where the institution runs a faculty of architecture a dean is normally at the helm of affairs and where an institution runs either a school or department of architecture, a head of school or department is in charge as the case may be. However schools of architecture in the United States of America have deans as the head of schools. As such, for the purpose of this review the term head of school will be used to connote this designation.

METHODOLOGY

A survey of a total of 246 students from three different universities in Nigeria, enrolled into the architecture program was carried out. Of this number, 180 were undergraduate students randomly selected between the 1st year and the 4th year of the Bachelor of architecture program, while the remaining 66 students were at the postgraduate level. Before the response to the question on what their preference between theorist and pragmatist was received, a series of other questions were asked to determine the level to which each student had been inspired by architects before

their enrolment into the program. The purpose of these questions was to know the extent of possible biases that could influence the eventual preferences of the students. Their level of inspiration by architects was ascertained based on three factors;

1. If the student had or has a direct relationship (family member, family friend, previous business relationship etc.) with any architect in practice.
2. If the student had been acquainted with the design works of any practicing architect renowned or not in the past before enrolment into the programme.
3. If the student had been acquainted with the published works of any academic architect renowned or not before enrolment into the programme.
4. If the student had or has a direct relationship (family member, family friend, previous business relationship etc.) with an architect who is in the academia.
5. The results of the registered influences and eventual preference of the students are presented in tables and simple statistical calculations from which percentages were obtained for each preference. Conclusions were drawn based on percentage outcomes

JOB DESCRIPTION OF A HEAD OF ARCHITECTURE SCHOOL

Most institutions run independent programs and job descriptions for school administrators may differ. However, for schools of architecture globally certain core duties are similar across the board for all heads of architecture schools. These include; curriculum structuring and or development; course allocations; approval and budget allocations for modules; licensure/ accreditation with professional body; examinations coordination; management of staff and other resources; and more importantly funding drive for internally generated revenue. Although there may be other added responsibilities that are arbitrary these form the core of the head of school's duties. The issue of fundraising could not have been more aptly described as Minutillo (2014) states

“The job of a dean, like the practice of architecture itself has become increasingly complex. It is not enough to be a well-regarded academic or a capable administrator; deans are expected to be visionaries, diplomats and maybe most of all superb fundraisers” (pg 69).

This statement embodies a summary of the roles and some of the heads of architecture schools today. However, finding ways of internally generating revenue is not the most important responsibility of the head of school. Steering the academic ship and navigating the course of architectural education in the institution to train well rounded architects equipped to meet the challenges of the industry remains the primary responsibility of the head of school and the litmus test for administrative success.

One of the consensus of the Oxford conference on Architectural Education 50 years on, held in 2008 was that schools of architecture were producing students with less awareness of the pragmatic, industry relevant knowledge to thrive in the industrial market place. As such, the debate on whether architecture ought to be taught in schools or learnt under apprenticeship in design studios was raised¹. Although

majority of the congregants favoured school-based academic training, the issue of paucity of technical knowledge resulting from current trend of studio teaching was emphasized. Roaf et al (2009) believes that many students in schools of architecture around the world are poorly taught on issues of building performance, technical knowledge and Health, safety and Environment (HSE), the later as indicated by a study published in 2003².

Ryghaug in her thesis puts part of the blame for students' poor knowledge on environmental issues on teaching. She suggests that there is less emphasis on practice and demonstration based teaching³. Although developing pedagogic techniques for individual modules are often the prerogative of the course tutors as earlier stated, yet the direction of teaching in a school of architecture is largely driven by the philosophy of the head of school. For instance, Roaf et al (2009) reports that one head of school in the UK thought it was a matter of opinion whether sustainability should be the driving force for architectural education⁴. This belief regardless of the implications will be inevitably reflected in course structuring and contents as well as in the selection of studio projects.

It follows therefore, that a pragmatist or practice-oriented head of school will drive learning towards more pragmatic course contents relevant to current practices than theory. For example Design intelligence (2015) describes Amale Andraos, dean of Columbia Graduate School of Architecture as “integrating real world problems into the curriculum with a bold and strong leadership”. Roaf et al (2009) cited a poll on a now defunct website which showed how distressed students of the department of architecture at UCLA were upon losing their rights to pragmatic teaching in favor of highly theoretical approach to design.

AN ARGUMENT FOR PRAGMATISTS

There have been emphasis on getting more pragmatists or practicing architects rather than theorists or academic architects as heads of schools and in some quarters this has become a norm. The pragmatists often appointed to take over the reins of the schools have been mostly architects of international or national repute. The main rationale behind their appointments as deans is their accomplishments and contribution to architecture besides the number of student interests they engender because of their high profiles, just as much as new state of the art facilities and buildings do. In principle, such personalities are expected to help bridge the gap between practice and theory but in reality, such notoriety may attract premium tuitions as well as funding from the private sector. However, what they bring to the table is a wealth of experience, international networking and relevance and a bridge between theory and practice having understood the realities, challenges and requirements for success in the global practice.

The practice of hiring notable practitioners especially in schools of architecture in the United States of America can be traced as far back as early 20th century. The likes of

Mies Van der Rohe moved from the Bauhaus and took up position as head of school at Illinois Institute of Technology (ITT) in 1938; just a year after Walter Gropius took up headship of the Harvard School of Architecture. This trend appears to be more pronounced amongst certain institutions with a particular level of rating or prestige. For instance most Ivy League schools have over the years engaged in the practice of hiring high profile pragmatic deans.

Hiring notable practitioners has its advantages as well as disadvantages. The first major issue is that of terms of contract as most of these practitioners tend to negotiate their terms of engagement. Sometimes, part of the conditions of service entails the practitioners running their practices concurrently. Wiel Arets who had offices in Amsterdam, Maastricht and Zurich and is in high demand as an international architect was appointed head of the school of architecture in ITT Chicago. The general concern this generated was whether the school would get enough of his time (Minutillo 2014). Similarly, Cesar Pelli one of the few recipients of the AIA gold medal and designer of some of the world's tallest buildings including the Petronas towers in Kuala Lumpur, served as dean of Yale University School of Architecture from 1977 to 1984, while still running a thriving office in New Haven, Connecticut with over 100 staff in his employ.

However, this has not deterred many schools of architecture in the United States from attempting to fill their Deanship chairs with renowned architects. Some schools even go as far as appointing acting deans for interim periods until these notable replacements are found (Minutillo 2014). The profiles and resumes of these renowned practitioners are often richer in the area of practice than in research. PhD degrees and academic specializations are often not part of the core requirements. Although Davis (2008) makes a case for why we need doctoral study and research in design, it however doesn't take away the fact that some of these practitioners have had vast experiences as visiting professors and faculty. This is not to say that only holders of PhDs are considered as true academics or in the context of this paper, theorists. However, most schools of Architecture in Europe, Australasia, Asia and Africa still place emphasis on the acquisition of a PhD as part of the requirements for academic progression.

Some institutions value a PhD the same way they value a high practice profile. As such, a head of school would be required to be either a highly recognized pragmatist or a thorough theorist with a PhD. For example, in the thesis on women administrators in architecture, Woosnam (2007) discussed about what the search committee for the position of dean of the school of Architecture, California College of Arts wanted. They wanted a candidate with either a high practice profile or a PhD. Similarly, in a survey on Architectural Education in Australasia, Oswald and Williams (2008) observed that academics agreed marginally that a PhD is as important for an architectural academic as a past history of designing award-winning buildings. As such, these two criteria were at par *de jure* but not so *de facto*.

However, one wonders if institutions seeking high profile pragmatists mostly take into account things like the Alma Mata the prospective candidates graduated from; the number of awards won; number of competitions won or judged; number of renowned buildings designed; and even number of countries in the world where they've undertaken design projects. For instance, Adele Naude Santos former dean of MIT school of Architecture obtained degrees in architecture from two Ivy League universities namely, Harvard and Pennsylvania and had undertaken projects in almost all continents around the world. She is a recipient of several awards and has won numerous competitions for projects and has also served as a juror for several international design competitions. Similarly, Alejandro Zaera-Polo, former dean of Princeton's School of Architecture is a graduate of Madrid's ETSA and Harvard. He is known for works such as Yokohama International Port Terminal in Japan and he has won several international design competitions and was a finalist in the recent ground zero competition. Bernard Tschumi who won the Parc de la Villette competition in 1983 became dean of Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture for 15 years while still running a successful practice with offices in New York and Paris. The likes of award winning architects Deborah Berke and Amale Andraos also currently serve as deans of the Yale School of Architecture and the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture respectively.

In her thesis, Woosnam (2007) observed that out of ten female architectural administrators/ heads, six had attended private Ivy League schools for either one or both of their degrees. The study also indicated that only one out of the ten had a PhD.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1

Item	Undergraduate students	Postgraduate students
No. of Students related to architects in practice	36	10
No. of Students acquainted with design works of architects in practice before enrollment	8	4
No. of Students acquainted with published works of architects in academia before enrollment	Nil	Nil
No. of Students related to architects in academia	5	2

Table 2

Students	Pragmatists	%	Theorists	%
Undergraduate students – 180	59	32.8	121	67.2
Postgraduate students – 66	31	47	35	53

The results show that for students in the undergraduate level, about 67% preferred theorists as heads of schools while approximately 33% preferred to have pragmatists instead. For the graduate students the margins were closer with 47% in favor of pragmatists and 53% preferring theorists. A summary of the reasons for the different opinions sampled from a cross section of the participants included;

- The fact that the experience, practice knowledge and contacts of the pragmatists would be more beneficial to the students than mere theory
- That practice acumen and technical knowledge can be learnt on the job while understudying or working for pragmatists but design acumen, philosophy and foundational knowledge is best garnered from theorists
- That pragmatists most of whom still run practices may have divided attention and not devote sufficient time to headship
- Fear that the presence of a high profiled pragmatist could inevitably drive up tuition fees
- That a pragmatist brand does not necessarily translate to educational administrative capability, pedagogical skill and an ability for balanced curriculum development

DISCUSSIONS

It would not have been surprising if majority of undergraduate students preferred to have pragmatists other than theorists as head of schools. One would have thought that many of them would relish the chance to be tutored by architects who they have read about and whose works they admire. The successes of the Architecture Association School (AA) in the UK in engendering high interest in student enrollment rate yearly despite the relatively high tuition fees, has been attributed partly to the fact that most notable alumni such as Pritzker Award winners Richard Rogers, Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid amongst others are likely to stay or return as teachers to the school. Based on the data, only about 20% (36) of undergraduate students in the architecture program had direct links and/or relationship with architects and of this number only 13 preferred pragmatists. It was an initial conception that at this stage, the concept or importance of a theorist over a pragmatist is less understood by them and that motivation to study architecture came as a result of seen works. Rather the data obtained from the survey revealed that only about 8 out of 180 undergraduate students were acquainted with design works of any known architect prior to enrollment.

The results also show that the percentage of post graduates that preferred having theorists as head of school was only slightly more than those who preferred

pragmatists. It seemed likely that over a larger sample base the choice for pragmatists would have been more because some post graduate students started having a change of preference when they gave some thought to the question after their original response was taken. Even though only 10 persons out of the 66 post graduate students interviewed were related to practicing architects. It is however not surprising at this stage of the architecture programme to observe an increase in preference for pragmatists as many graduate students have already studied the works of historic and contemporary architectural masters. Some have already patterned their design philosophies after these masters as was a common practice amongst our course mates during our graduate years.

The statistics given by Design Intelligence (2016) for the top 20 undergraduate and graduate schools of architecture in the US for 2015 shows an interesting dynamic, that is worth examining. The data shows that most Ivy League schools with the exception of Cornell which was listed in both undergrad and graduate categories were listed primarily in the graduate schools category. This may not be unconnected to the fact that most Ivy League schools that offer architecture programmes have had a history of hiring renowned pragmatists as deans. Although some of these schools run exclusively graduate programmes, others that run programmes for both levels of students were only recognized as top schools in the graduate category.

As such, it is possible that what these pragmatists bring to the table will have more effect amongst graduate students and in the graduate programme than at the undergraduate level. It brings to mind two of the reasons given by the students who partook in the survey; that a pragmatist brand does not necessarily translate to educational administrative capability, pedagogical skill and ability for balanced curriculum development and; that design acumen, philosophy and foundational knowledge is best garnered from theorists. This may be true especially in the early formative years of the student and who best to monitor and administer the formative training stages of the undergraduate levels than the theorist.

Another point worthy of note is that some institutions may prefer engaging the services of pragmatists as heads or administrators because administrative work tends to make scholarly work, which includes research and teaching, suffer. Since for most institutions, scholarly work serves as the pathway for career development in the academia, a theorist not yet at the pinnacle of the profession would eventually be at a disadvantaged position due to limited scholarly works. Woosnam (2007) also reported that four out of ten of the female heads of school complained that research, scholarly work and professional development suffered as a result of their administrative duties. This is the dilemma of the theorist whereas the pragmatist would not be under pressure to produce scholarly works as their career path does not depend on it, either partly or wholly.

At this point, we would want to highlight Roaf's (2009) suggestion of splitting architectural education into two distinct arms. But rather than creating two arms of digital graphics and pragmatic design as suggested by her, we would suggest a split in headship at two levels. A graduate programme administered by a pragmatist head of school and a theorist led undergraduate programme. What this means is that the two levels of architecture programmes will be administered differently but with the

ultimate aim of balancing theory and practice at the required stages of training and at the right pace. The importance of this combination has been emphasized in the area of teaching as Oswald and Williams (2008) states

“A commercial practitioner is an expert at producing architecture. They are highly visually literate, they understand the building industry, procurement systems and contracts and importantly, they are involved in design decisions on a daily basis. An architectural academic is an expert teacher and researcher. They must also have some level of awareness of architectural practice and the construction industry. These two sets of abilities are not mutually exclusive; some practitioners are excellent educators and some academics have become famous designers. However, in the majority of cases individuals do not possess the full spectrum of these abilities and thus both practitioners and academics are needed to effectively educate architecture students”. (pg 163)

Many schools of architecture are currently adopting this theorist – pragmatist combination in architectural education and what this paper ultimately suggests is a possible adoption of this combination in architectural educational administration. But as all research go, the impact of this proposed administrative structure will need to be assessed critically and with time to ascertain its possible merits and demerits.

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