

YOU CAN'T FAKE CONFLICT OR A VISIT TO THE STUDIO WITH MICHEL FOUCAULT AND RICHARD SENNETT

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INTRODUCTION

The French philosopher Henri Bergson tells us that "there is not less, but more in [the idea] of disorder than in order..." because "In the idea of disorder there is already the idea of order, plus its negation, plus the motive for that negation..."¹ The aim of this paper is to initiate an inquiry into the themes of disorder and conflict in architectural education.

These themes have had a particularly prominent role in the evolution of both architectural and social theory during the last two decades. In 1966 Robert Venturi made the then revolutionary statement: "I like complexity and contradiction in architecture."² Twenty-three years later the theme of revolution could be invoked directly as in Michael Rotondi's: "Architecture is now a guerilla act,"³ or in Mark Wigley's introduction to the deconstructivist show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York where he wrote: "What is being disturbed is a set of deeply entrenched cultural assumptions which underlie a certain view of architecture, assumptions about order, harmony, stability, and unity."⁴

Observing the resonance of these statements does not mean at all that their authors are pursuing the same formal investigations, but does suggest a more indirect connection to a larger cultural pattern. This pattern is seen by critics in other disciplines as in Alan Wilde's definition of the new irony:

"Postmodern (irony) ... is suspensive: an indecision about the meanings or relations of things is matched by a willingness to live with uncertainty, to tolerate, and, in some cases, to welcome .a world Seen as random and multiple, even, at times, absurd."⁵

or in his conclusion that the postmodern concern is with the surface image:

"But there is, in fact, only surface: 'The world is neither significant nor absurd. It is, quite simply.'"⁶

The British writer J.G. Ballard describes this condition more bluntly:

"The thing about reason is that it rationalizes reality for us--I mean in the Freudian sense of providing a convenient explanation, perhaps too convenient. And I'm very interested in dismantling every assumption I can see, however trivial it might be "⁷

These themes are all suggested in one word: conflict. The Oxford English Dictionary gives us three senses in which this word is meaningful to our inquiry:

- "2.b. A mental or spiritual struggle within a man
- c. The clashing or variance of opposed principles, statements, arguments, etc.
- 3. Dashing together collision, or violent mutual impact of physical bodies"⁸

The word thus contains precisely the ambiguities of our inquiry. We generally value the clash of principles as an element of academic discourse, but we may be deflected from this discourse by our spirit on the one hand, or an aesthetic attachment to the form of collision or impact on the other. Conflict is an architectonic idea in that it identifies not elements themselves, but the character of their relationship. It is thus necessary to move outward from a study of the locus of conflict to discover the nature and authority of the elements conflicted. This inquiry will consider both broad patterns and intimate realms of conflict in architectural education.⁹

SOME CONFLICTS IN THE HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

Formal education of architects, commencing in France in 1671 with the Academie Royale d'Architecture, and here in the 1860's is widely understood for creating in its schools a cultural milieu

which is distinct from the society surrounding it. This is due in part to the unique task of the architect to manipulate the medium of space and form where of necessity both scientific knowledge and cultural/artistic knowledge are required. Architecture and its educational institutions thus become a field upon which the contemporary issues of science and culture must be addressed by the very nature of the act.

The education of architects has always mixed the artistic traditions of craft and the positivistic traditions of science. In the Beaux Arts a rigid craft tradition predominated wherein the role of the school was to transmit through the osmosis of closed juries, the acceptable artistic formulations of the time. The necessary comprehension of technology was provided as a distinctly subordinate adjunct. The struggles of this system were legendary, as in the rejection of Viollet-le-Duc for aesthetic reasons at the Beaux Arts in Paris as described by Richard Chaffee: "His first lecture was a fiascoThe second lecture ... caused further uproar There was a similar riot during and after each of the following lectures, until after the seventh one of March 18, 1864, Viollet-le-Duc resigned."¹⁰ The history of the school is replete with other examples of unusual conflict, riots, and government action to control the education of architects. The power exercised by the Ecole was visible and unavoidable in France.

As the Beaux-Arts withered aesthetically, modernists developed at the Bauhaus and subsequently in many schools in the United States a new system of instruction, also studio based, but with a far greater scientific flavor. Undermining the pervasive role of historical precedent, problems were now to be defined and solved on the basis of and in expression of their technological constituents. The implicit goal was coincident with the faith in science as a means of rational progress.

As described recently at one school:

"What we are doing is taking you and we are going to teach you how to be architects. And in order to do it, the first thing you have to do is to erase what you think architecture is ...You have to start almost clean. It's a complete unlearning."¹¹

Thus, in true scientific fashion, most schools sought to create a human tabula rasa upon which could then be writ only the appropriate techniques of form making, thus neatly filtering out a few thousand years of confusion.¹²

This evolution could hardly have been more fortunate with respect to the location of architecture schools in the United States primarily in university settings. The development of the modern research university, as exemplified by the founding of Johns Hopkins University in 1876, created an instrument for the organizing and gathering of scientific knowledge through research. Although architecture's credentials in this milieu have often been suspect due to its connection with the arts, and the abnormality of the studio in the University, the existence of technological content and the fervent desire of many of its practitioners to express the technology resultant from the scientific process (or thought to be resultant) permitted at least architecture to embrace the university, even if the gesture was not entirely reciprocated. Whether partial cause or coincidence, the expansion of the scientific approach to embrace the behavioral sciences was often perceived as a threat to artistic autonomy which resulted in the repudiation of the scientific direction and a conscious re direction toward the craft tradition in many schools in the last decade.¹³

When the thrust of this evolution toward a greater integration as a discipline in the university is considered in conjunction with the formal interests of the last twenty years, a pattern emerges. The fabric of architectural education has been moving toward greater structure and accommodation to the positivistic tradition of the university, as the content of that education is moving to a less scientific craft orientation.

We may consider architectural education as a medium of expression, and a realm of interaction, related to, but distinct from architectural practice or the shaping of the environment itself, each of which may be considered as related but distinct media.¹⁴ Architectural education is characterized (as is all education) by the interaction of two distinctly unequal groups, teachers and students, each involved in related but, quite distinct pursuits, teachers of their own development within the profession or educational establishment, and students of their entry into the profession.

The most unique form of interaction which shapes the character of architectural education is the studio, a setting which requires criticism and often conflict, punctuated by the public review of student's work in the jury. Due to the demands of the studio and the large number of specialized courses required, most architectural schools are highly cohesive and physically localized with respect to their larger institutions. Thus architecture schools can be seen as highly complex social environments of an urban character. Indeed, as the chairman of a large program I have often imagined that some of my experiences were similar to that of the mayor of a small town, or that of the captain of an ocean liner, or possibly (and more alarmingly) the warden of some unidentified institution.

MICHEL FOUCAULT AND ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION AS A MEDIUM FOR THE EXPRESSION OF POWER

Michel Foucault has developed an analysis of this condition in which he explores the systemic nature of our institutions. His original work on the rise of modern prisons, hospitals, and asylums, was followed by the beginnings of his study of sexuality each viewed as an instrument of society.

His analysis of institutions is fully applicable to our medium of architectural education. He views the traditional disciplines of knowledge as "modalities of power," technologies for structuring and maintaining power.

"On the whole, therefore, one can speak of the formation of a disciplinary society in this movement that stretches from the enclosed disciplines, a sort of social 'quarantine' to and indefinitely generalizable mechanism of 'panopticism'."¹⁵

PANOPTICISM

The panopticon was published by Sir Samuel and Jeremy Bentham in 1791. Originally called the Inspection House and proposed as a general solution for "schools, manufacturies, hospitals, and especially prisons" the Benthams proposed a revolutionary structure which combined surveillance and restraint by organizing the inmates in a radial fashion around a central point of observation from which all would be continually monitored without their knowledge.¹⁶ Indeed the monitor himself would also be monitored, giving the system a self maintaining independence relative to any individual's performance as the prisoners would not even be able to tell if the observer were in fact observing.¹⁷

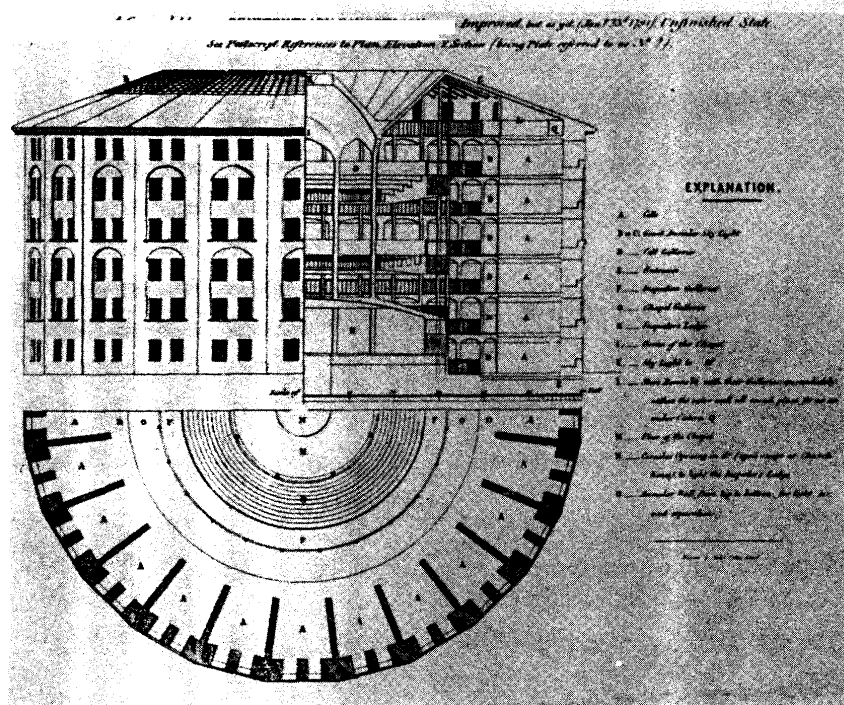


Figure 1. "Jeremy Bentham's design for a Panopticon prison, 1791"¹⁸

It is not without irony that the panopticon has been much discussed in architectural circles in relation to the potentially coercive effect of buildings and with a great deal of concern about the potential role of the architect in lending the expertise necessary to design such devices. It has not been much discussed, however, with respect to architectural education itself.

For Foucault the panopticon is really a symbol for the much more invisible structure of power in society wherein obvious power supported by direct physical coercion has been replaced by invisible power organized structurally in the fabric of society.

A VISIT TO THE DARK SIDE OF THE STUDIO

As the backbone of architectural education, the studio provides a field of intense personal interaction, often leading to disturbance. Learning within the design studio occurs in a project context, where faculty offer a "problem" and then provide criticism as the student attempts to address it. The student, thus, has a chance to develop his or her own ideas with the assistance of an experienced professional. Many skills and habits of inquiry are transmitted indirectly through the teacher as role model. The system demands conflict and confrontation.

There can be a darker side to this process. It can be the locus of manipulation and counter-manipulation, sometimes of the most venal kind. There are many concrete images of these practices, as the critic who directs students as if the projects were his or her own, sometimes to produce results thought essential to the teacher's success. Or consider the student who describes his practice thus:

"I deliberately manipulated the critics by arbitrarily changing my designs in ways of no particular meaning to me in order to see what they would say to avoid the boredom of their normal rapid reactions to my work."¹⁹

According to Kathryn Anthony's analysis of the jury system the majority of the emotions felt by students in that setting are negative:

"The most commonly felt emotions are anxiety, fear, frustration, anger, embarrassment, disappointment, guilt, and disgust."²⁰

She also comments on the observation of defensive behavior. As described in the words of another architect:

"I learned generally to use extensive verbal presentations to limit and direct the thrust of jury criticism. I also learned to challenge the jury members as a way of blunting negative criticism."²¹

Foucault provides us with a model by which we can understand the role and drama of the jury. For him the jury would be a particularly intensified case of the examination, which he describes thus:

"The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. That is why, in all the mechanisms of discipline, the examination is highly ritualizedThe superimposition of the power relations and knowledge relations assume in the examination all its visible brilliance."²²

The climate in most schools of architecture places the highest value on artistic innovation and is outwardly antagonistic to the "real" world and "commercial practice of architecture". Thomas Dutton, however, sees in this a mechanism by which the student is actually habituated to a variety of ideas which are actually quite closely aligned with the views of that outside world. On the subject of competition, for example, he writes:

"... As in a market economy, competition is considered the means of improving the product by pitting one producer against all others Not only generating needless emotional pressure and antipathy among peers, competition tends to promote the belief that ideas are unique, to be nurtured individually, closely guardedSuch a system portrays ideas as personal, not meant to be shared, lest someone else gain a competitive edge.

"One significant consequence arises out of this view. Students come to believe that they must work alone, or with those who see the world similarly to ensure the 'purity' of ideas. Design in this view is legitimized as a self-indulgent activity."²³

Foucault would seem to agree.

If the consequences of these difficulties were merely the result of some personal problems of either students or critics, or were isolated incidents, they would not be cause for concern. There is, however, some indication that for some students and critics the process itself leads to more serious problems in defining and seeing architecture. When conflict occurs without intellectual leadership, the resultant polarization can suggest to the student that all views have symmetrical opposites, and that one view is as good as another as suggested in the Architectural Education study of 1981:

"There were many examples of students misunderstanding advice due to their habit of labeling everything which did not fit with their view as fitting with an opposite view."²⁴

This can lead to a deformation of fundamental positions based upon irrelevant or dysfunctional considerations. As one observer in the ACSA study writes:

"often I felt I could point to a given student's professed ideology and recognize it as a mechanism for protecting weaknesses and legitimizing the strengths of interpersonal and thinking skills"²⁵

A more positive view of the consequence of conflict is found in the experiences of the best students who are not so easily deflected from powerful synthesis by negative interactions. This leads to an understanding in human terms of the fundamental irony of architectural education, described in the following case study of Petra, the student and Quist, the teacher:

"... In thoughts about her role as a student and as a professional designer she consistently returned to the conflict between constraint and freedom. This conflict, shared by all the students, was for Joanna an active part of everything she did. Her desire for both seemed to have become a conscious irony, and, it seemed, a starting point for thinking. The ability to handle irony, to realize one wants two irreconcilable things, was of course one of the themes Quist [the instructor] spoke about a good deal."²⁶

A unique condition of architectural education is that the educational method is based upon intense conflict. This is out of step with the general trend of society's institutions and personal development in our age. If, as Foucault contends, the general trend of society has been away from visible power exercised through coercion, to invisible power exercised through the fabric of society. Architecture has an ancient system of education based in part upon the visible exercise of authority, peopled by individuals who are members of a culture opposed to the visible expression of conflict.

RICHARD SENNETT AND THE CONCEPT OF PURIFIED IDENTITY

Richard Sennett has explored the practice of authority and conflict and believes that one of the characteristic responses to complexity is powerfully linked to, the life cycle. Sennett defines his concept of the "purified identity" in an examination of the peculiar similarities between the behavior of young doctors, who view themselves as "gods", revolutionaries, who seem surprisingly inflexible, and planners who will go to great lengths to defend the necessity of their plans based upon technical rationality (this last group having considerable similarity to architects). Sennett, exploring the description of the young revolutionary, Hong, encountered in Andre Malraux's novel, The Conquerors:

"Hong, their eventual enemy, is an anarchist, yet curiously much more rigid than they are. His sense of what is the right thing to do, what is 'correct,' flies in the face of the facts of the revolution; Hong is unwilling to bend, he cannot submit himself to the chaos of events in order to act, he cannot yield himself and his commitment to the test of conflicting experiences in the actual struggle. Instead, Hong must put himself in such a position that he seems to stand above the chaos, to be safe while the others are troubled, to be willfully immune when [others] have the courage to be self-doubting and confused."

Sennett goes on to explain this phenomenon as it relates to young doctors:

"Both Hong, the young revolutionary, and these young doctors have exerted a peculiar kind of strength--a power to cut themselves off from the world around them, to make themselves distant, and perhaps lonely, by defining themselves in a rigid way. This fixed self-definition gives them a strong weapon against the outside world. They prevent a pliant traffic between themselves and men around them and so acquire a certain immunity to the pain of conflicting and tangled events that might otherwise confuse and perhaps even overwhelm them."²⁷

Sennett views this as a phenomenon related to the individual's developmental cycle. Basing his work upon that of Erik Erikson he suggests that individuals seek "purified" identity to hold the messy complexities of the world at bay. He views the physical isolation of the suburbs as originating from the desire of many people to have isolated and purified lives. These isolated and purified environments then fail to create the opportunities by which young people might attempt to develop robust identities. This poverty of experience he compares to the richness and character of lower middle class, urban life. Sennett views the process of psychological maturation as defined by four distinct phases, the latter of which cannot occur without conflict:

" Stage one: Adolescence brings to a head the imbalance between the capacity for experience and the fund of experience available that could guide new powers and strengths. The human being is able to replace his parents at the very heart of what before constituted their authority, for he is able to synthesize moral and value rules that define his identity in a social context wider than the family.

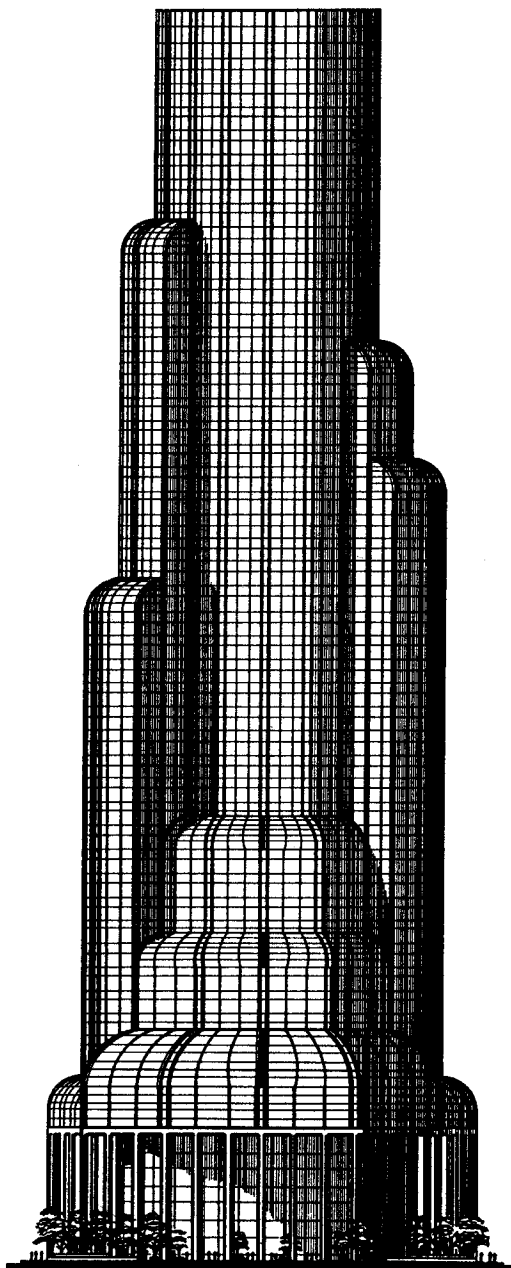
" Stage two: The tension in this growth imbalance can be resolved through the mechanisms of purified experience in creating an identity, so that the individual projects the meaning of experiences he is afraid to have, and thus seals himself off from actually confronting the unknown in the social world around him. The coherent identity that emerges leads to a voluntary limitation and withdrawal in social life, a servitude to projections of social reality that are unified and pain-transcending

" Stage three: In trying to enforce a vision of coherent order, the young person meets an immovable obstacle or social situation that is out of his control. The disorderly world defeats the dreams of coherence and solidarity

" Stage four: Childhood curiosity about the immediate world is reborn. the desire to see, apart from the desire to see things in their proper place, is regenerated. In other words, the courage to look in unknown places and experience feelings and situations one has not met before re-emerges. And out of this process can come a kind of human concern centered on and appreciative of the 'otherness' in the world."²⁸

The consequences of this formulation may be that many students feel forced to take positions to protect themselves against the uncertainty of dealing with all the forces of the medium of architecture in their complexity. In words applicable to architectural form, Sennett, warns us:

"The work of authority has a goal: to convert power into images of strength. In doing this work, people often search for images that are clear and simple. This search for clear and distinct images of authority, however reasonable, is dangerous."²⁹



Two images illustrate aspects of this issue. Figure 2 presents a building designed by a student in a “high-rise” studio at an American school of architecture which was published in that school's brochure. The reduction of the building to a clear and simple collection of prismatic objects is complete. All tangible signs of any conflicting concerns which might reveal additional intentions, possibly of a humanistic nature, are suppressed in this vision of reductionist clarity.

In figure 3 the exhibition installation of the work of the distinguished architect Frank Israel at the Walker Art Center in Minnesota raises a different set of issues. Does the incorporation of a highly complex (deconstructive?) geometry of boards in the design of the rectangular, prismatic enclosure reduce formal conflict among architectural elements to a decorative motif, or is it exactly the point of a greater concern with the surface.

Figure 2. High rise building design, student of architecture³⁰

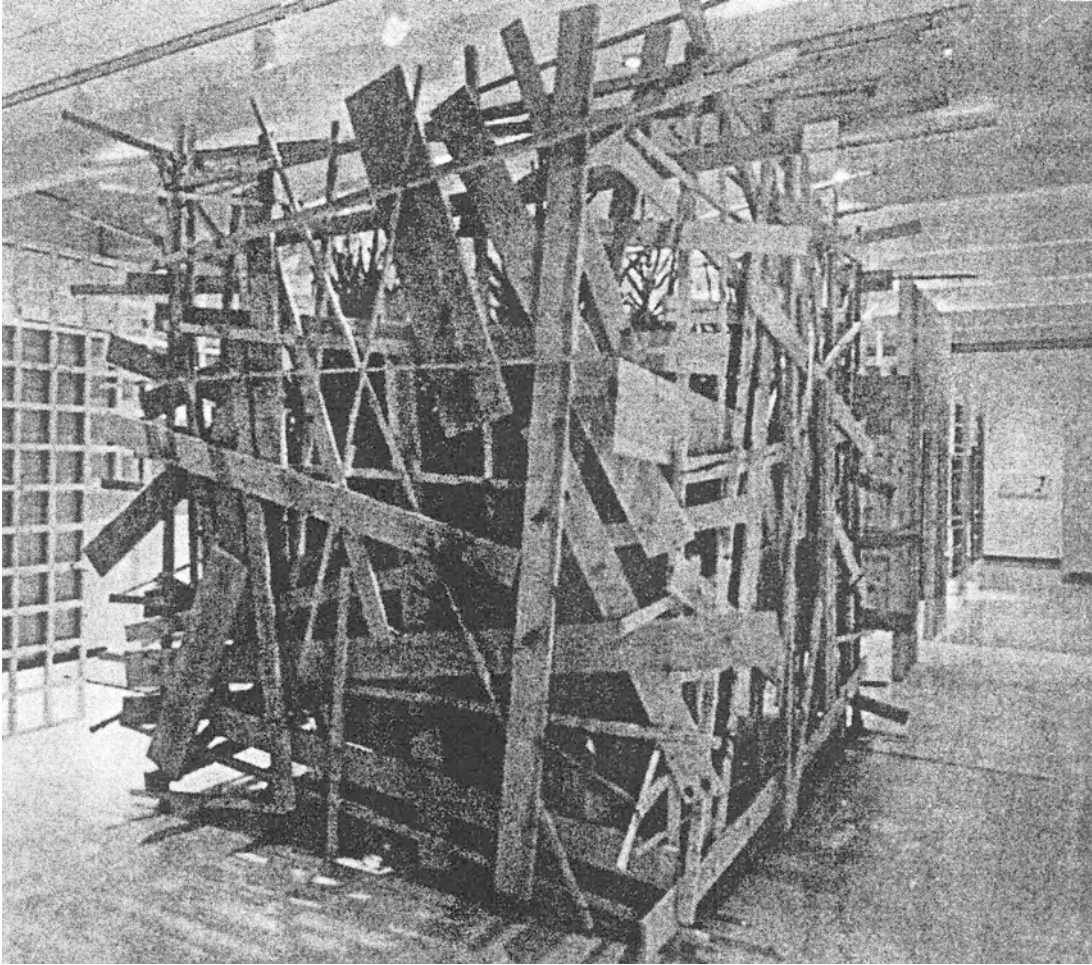


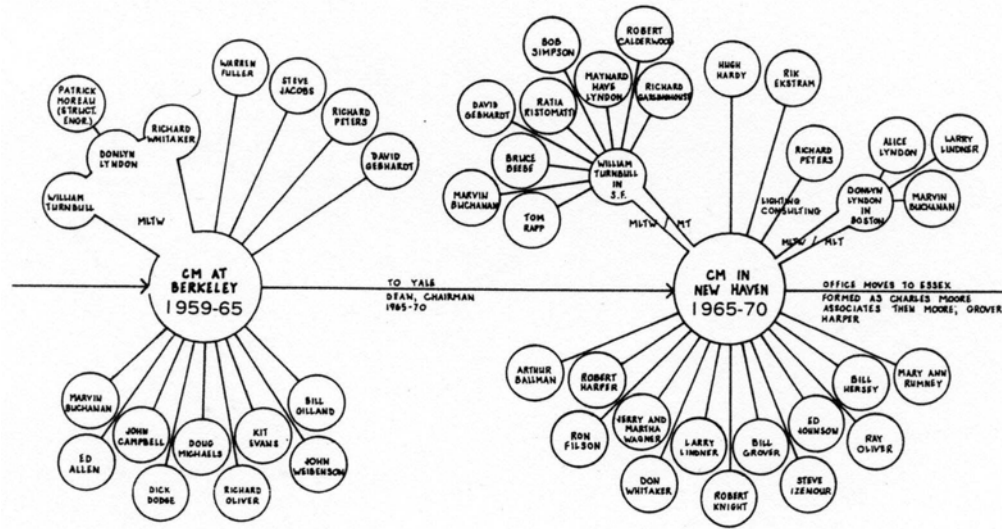
Figure 3. Franklin Israel, exhibition installation, Walker Art Center.³¹

THE STAR SYSTEM: PRODUCING AUTHORITY

Richard Sennett points to another consequence of the systemic organization of practice; the star system. In a significant analysis of the condition as it operates among concert pianists, he makes the following key points:

"The 'star system' refers to the profits which accrue by maximizing the distance between fame and obscurity, such that people lose the desire to see a live performance at all if they cannot see someone who is famous..." The very essence of the new code of performance was to intensify inequality: if 500 people are famous, no one is, and so to find someone you can call a recognizable personality, a man who stands out, at least 490 must be pushed into the background. This is not benign neglect. Those 490 must be positively unrewarded in the same measure the 10 are rewarded; by denial as much as approval, a few people will then be brought forward as recognizable individuals."³²

Although it has not been studied systematically in architecture, there are constant informal references to its existence, and in certain circles there is a pre-occupation with locating oneself in reference to the "great one" through genealogical studies.



may no longer be capable. And the necessary conflicts of both education and practice are distinctly irrational in an "efficient" society.

Are we strong enough to fulfill the imperatives of our condition?

ENDNOTES

¹ Gilles Deleuze, Bergsonism, (Zone, New York, 1988) p. 17

² Robert Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1966, 1977 second edition) p. 16

³ Michael Rotondi quoted at AIA Design Committee meeting, Los Angeles 1988

⁴ Mark Wigley, Deconstructivist Architecture, (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1988) p. 19-20

⁵ Alan Wilde, Horizons of Assent, (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1987) p. 44

⁶ Ibid. p. 71

⁷ J.G. Ballard in Re/Search #8/9, "J.G. Ballard" (Re/Search Publications, San Francisco, 1984) p. 43-44

⁸ James A. A. Murray ed. Oxford English Dictionary, (Oxford Press, Oxford, 1961) Vol II p. 809

⁹ I am grateful to my colleague at Temple University, Dr. Amir Ameri, for insisting that the definition of terms was crucial to this discussion. I am also indebted to David Cronrath, George Dodds, and Emanuel Kelly at Temple, and Dr. Jon Lang at Penn, as well as Dr. Ameri for their general comments and support. The failings of this inquiry are, of course, mine alone.

¹⁰ Richard Chaffee, "The Teaching of Architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts", in The Architecture of the Ecole Des Beaux-Arts, (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1977) p. 103

¹¹ Julian Beinart, quoting a students memory in, "Structure of the Content of Design", in Architecture Education Study, Vol I, Consortium of the Eastern Schools of Architecture supported by the Andrew Mellon Foundation, 1981) p. 253

¹² The Beaux-Arts tradition also requires a purification of the student, the contention here is that because of its reliance upon tradition, even competing traditions, that the Beaux-Arts purification is of a different nature.

¹³ One of the worst insults now possible in architectural discourse is to call one's adversary a positivist.

¹⁴ I am indebted to a very critical anonymous reviewer who under the auspices of the ACSA paper process emphasized the crucial importance understanding architecture as a medium of expression. The idea at that time was implicit, but not so clear.

¹⁵ Paul Rabinow ed., The Foucault Reader, (Pantheon, New York, 1984) p. 206, the words are Foucault's.

¹⁶ Nikolaus Pevsner, A History of Building Types, (Princeton University Press, Princeton), p. 163

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, in Rabinow op.cit., p. 192

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 163

¹⁹ William Hellow, architect, personal communication, 1988

²⁰ Kathryn H. Anthony, "Private Reactions to Public Criticism", Journal of Architectural Education, Vol. 40 #3, Spring 1987, p. 2-11.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Michel Foucault, op. cit. p. 197

²³ Thomas A. Dutton, "Design and Studio Pedagogy", Journal of Architectural Education, Vol. 41, #1, Fall 1987, p. 18

²⁴ Roger Simmonds, in Architecture Education Study, Vol II op. cit., p. 167

²⁵ Ibid., p. 179

²⁶ Ibid. p. 146

²⁷ Richard Sennett, The Uses of Disorder, (Knopf, New York, 1970) p. 5-6

²⁸ Ibid., p. 114-115

²⁹ Richard Sennett, Authority, (Random House; Vintage, New York, 1981) p. 165

³⁰ School and student withheld, available on request. 1986.

³¹ As published in the New York Times, January 1, 1989.

³² Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man, (Random House; Vintage, New York, 1978) p. 290

³³ GA Houses 7, "Special Issue: Charles Moore and Company", 1980, p. 130