Chapter 4. LESSON ONE
CRITERIA FOR JUDGMENT
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A. What makes a good building?

Who decides what is good architecture? Can you, the student or young practitioner trust established authority figures, or should you really find things out for yourself? Surely something deeply emotional drove you in choosing to become an architect. Can you articulate this passion into an idea of what architecture means for you? Fine — but if what you feel deep inside contradicts what you are told about architecture? What then? Which criteria in your possession will allow you to decide the truth? And don’t fall for the deception that “there is no truth... everything is relative”, which is just a ploy to justify bad buildings and their architects’ egos.

Criteria for judgment are not only useful, but also essential. Yes, architecture is like physics, where you can prove or disprove assumptions and theories experimentally. The effects of architectural space on users can indeed be measured. Architecture is practical in that buildings are built so they must at least stand up. But how to distinguish the good buildings from the bad ones? By what criteria? Distinguishing good from bad physics is easy: the good theories describe observed reality, whereas bad theories are invalidated by experiment and observation. Bad theories don’t make sense when compared to nature.

I offer here observable criteria for judging good architecture. You will create your own set of tools using results coming primarily from outside conventional architecture. There are no shortcuts. Unless you are ready to believe anything anyone tells you without reflection, you need to develop an independent method of judgment. These are critical questions, since they decide your future: what you choose to learn in becoming an architect, and what to be wary of. You should learn only techniques that will enable you to design and erect good buildings.

It’s automatic for students to trust authority and to believe their teachers and books. Beware of conforming to other people’s agendas and prejudices, however. You might spend your entire education picking up useless information just because it is presented to you in your courses. Without verifiable criteria for judgment, one is likely to be misled by non-falsifiable bits of information, and even deliberate misinformation. The end result is to accumulate a collection of opinions, which is mistaken for the framework or body of a discipline and actually leads you away from good design.
B. Advice for architecture students

Science contains only verifiable content. Computing has to design and execute programs that give answers. Mathematics possesses an internal mechanism for crosschecking and verifying results. Beginning your education in those disciplines at any entry point, you can just follow the thread to more complete knowledge. It will all make sense. But architecture students have the tremendous burden of verifying what they are going to be taught from day one of architecture school. Those that don’t question basic assumptions sleepily go through indoctrination, picking up dogma and images instead of facts and analytical tools.

Let me offer some practical advice here to every architecture student:

1. Ask the right questions, and find the right answers, and soon enough to guide your academic learning trajectory. Your questions should be aimed at finding out how to design the most marvelous, adaptive, healthy buildings imaginable. How to create environments that are nourishing — that people fall in love with, and people can fall in love in. Don’t accept conventional answers that are based on fashion, what has been done up until now, or simply what is “allowed” by the powers-to-be.

2. I suggest you talk with as many practicing architects (not academics) as possible. Preferably those in a small or modest-size firm that will be similar to one that might hire you when you finish. Ask them explicitly what skills they require, and note those down. Also pose the question of what would be a waste of time learning in school, and you might be surprised by the answer. Picking up certain dogmatic ways of thinking about design could make you unemployable!

3. Some key warning points reveal dangerous prejudices in faculty members and even in entire departments. A hatred of the past as a resource of solutions for building today is a danger signal (remember that hatred justifies destruction, not creativity). Certainly, almost every instructor claims to love historical buildings and cities, yet at the same time they might dogmatically say that those have nothing to teach us today. This is a serious misconception.

4. Another warning signal is someone who mistrusts science when it explains the way buildings affect people; who seems to be oblivious to the existence of such findings, and when told about them, ignores them altogether. Instructors harboring this prejudice, when challenged, will claim that architecture is an Art, and therefore one shouldn’t be bothered by scientific data. But buildings are not abstract sculptures as long as they have to house people, and to stand in urban fabric that is inhabited by people and their activities.

5. If mentioning the link between ornament and human psychological response only makes them angry, your teachers are reacting emotionally because their prejudices are being questioned. If you have to learn from those individuals, you will inherit their limiting prejudices. The ban on ornament is an old outdated story, long irrelevant, but some instructors haven’t caught up with the times.
6. Look outside the usual architectural names for real solutions. A new generation of practitioners is turning to science to improve their designs, because those solutions are not found in the old books. Search for results that validate good buildings based on the positive response from their users. Detour around self-serving propaganda. Try to read articles by non-architects to get an unbiased opinion. Look for some extraordinarily-relevant result by a biologist, for example, that is ignored by your architecture instructors.

7. But be extremely suspicious whenever something of interest coming from science is presented in terms of what a prominent architect already said — it might be a way of twisting the result to bring it into a politically correct arena. People defending conventional practice could be trying to profit from science superficially, and you cannot be sure they actually understand what's going on. Insecure individuals "re-interpret" important results so those become non-threatening to their own prejudices, hence meaningless.

C. Design innovation cannot rely on old authority

Key architectural spokespersons continue to assure aspiring young architects that everything is fine: there is nothing new to learn from today's science except what supports conventional design thinking. They will not risk disrupting the smooth working of the system. As for trusting higher authority to guarantee innovative standards for education, the reality is not reassuring. The university's higher administration doesn't examine what is taught in architecture schools, as long as the classes are full. The school rightly leaves the curriculum up to the department. The department complies with accreditation (in the USA through NAAB) by applying the standard model of post-war architectural education based on the design studio from the 1920s.

High-flying architecture schools that do have the clout to change their curricula at will are too caught up following the sometimes-silly avant-garde. Such schools feed into and increase the power of a system that already makes most of the decisions in prestigious world architecture. That system is all about image and power. Any change away from this cozy relationship might threaten the top schools' privileged status. Innovative results based on scientific information that appear — even in the most superficial manner — to boost the existing image-based design paradigm are welcome. Otherwise, they are ignored.

The way forward is to appeal to evidence, honesty, and intelligence. A lot is riding on how you choose to handle the many contradictions in architecture, or whether to simply take the easy way out and pay no attention to them. Don't suppress your own body signals telling you that some famous buildings are in reality terrible. Don't try to convince yourself of the opposite just to be part of the crowd. It's better to keep your integrity whole and your professional conscience intact, for your own mental health, or just in case you decide to pursue another career later in life. And don't ever forget that architects design for human beings.