AN EXERCISE IN FREEDOM: A CASE STUDY IN ARCHITECTURE EDUCATION

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Can one visualize a teaching course which triggers a lively reaction in a class of unsuspecting students of Architecture? A course which borrows its main theme from a most controversial contemporary subject, such as the proposal for a new Museum of Acropolis in Athens, and enriches it with an appropriately large scale perception? A course, finally, based on invited, non-paid external contributors, who help out with individual lectures or participate in impromptu discussions?

These rather unusual procedures, at least to teaching at the National Technical University of Athens, were the focus of an experimental course in Planning, offered in 1988-89. In recreating the prevailing atmosphere of that course, I will address myself to three distinct, yet intermingled, levels: the pragmatic (organizational aspects), the ideological (confrontational tactics) and the feedback (group dynamics).

The need for a new Museum of Acropolis - to supplement the insufficiently small one, already existing on top of the Acropolis- has been in the air for a long time. Its construction, however, became urgent after 1976, when the extensive deterioration of the classical monuments, due to air pollution, was thoroughly documented. Realizing that there could be no short-term solution to pollution problems, the majority of experts decided that all major works of art should be removed from the monuments and placed within the safety of an appropriately equipped museum. There, they would be joined by the famous Elgin marbles, presently at the British Museum, and already requested by Greece.

The Ministry of Culture patronized this long standing "dream". It was decided that an international architectural competition should be organized for the new Museum and a related brief was being secretly prepared throughout 1987.

As can be easily imagined, the prospect of removing the "eternal" works of art from their original place created a furor in Greece. Such a decision could not but raise eyebrows in a country where the Acropolis was idolized as the unique and uncontested national symbol. Moreover, the British government seemed unwilling to part with the Elgin marbles and doubts were raised about the suitability of the site chosen for the Museum.

This had already proved a major stumbling block on the occasion of two former and inconclusive architectural competitions for the Museum, held in 1977 and 1980. In its third attempt, the Ministry of Culture decided to proceed with expropriating a number of buildings bordering with the existing site, thus enlarging it to cover an entire city block. But still, the site was burdened with a massive restored neoclassical building, which could not be removed, and was located on a very busy intersection of central Athens.
A two-day caucus on the subject, organized by the Architectural Society of Greece in the Spring of 1988, proved that there were valid arguments against the use of the available site for such a grand project. Another source of concern was the competition brief, which was deemed disproportionate to the functional capacity of that particularly saturated part of downtown Athens. According to the brief, a rather bulky building was needed, covering a total area of 13,000 sq.m. The mere scale of the building was prohibitive, especially in the vicinity of the Acropolis. A stubborn, yet inconclusive debate followed, highly publicized by the press, between the Ministry and the architects. The new Museum of Acropolis had finally become a cause célèbre.

At the starting point of the course I organized with the help of two colleagues, Theodoros Panzaris and Panayiotis Tournikiotis, no one knew whether the competition would actually take place or under which conditions it would be announced. A committee of diverse experts had already been formed in an attempt to iron things out, various rumors were circulating about alternative proposals, yet nothing was definitely settled.

Needless to say, we were deeply convinced that there existed crucial dimensions to the problem which the Ministry of Culture had overlooked. Our initial urge was to capitalize on this exciting problem, which we suspected would interest the students, provided a new set of playing rules was devised.

Instead of a conventional design for a "monumental building", to fit into a given site, it would be perhaps more enticing to explore the entire Historical Center of Athens, surrounding the Acropolis on all sides, for possible alternative sites for the Museum. The Museum itself could be conceived either as a unique complex or as a number of units dispersed throughout the area: it could be an entirely new construction filling an existing void or a transformation/reuse of an existing one. It could relate to the urban tissue itself or to its "gaps": the various archeological sites or green spaces.

Perhaps more important then the above, was the need for the integration of the museum into the social fabric of the Historical Center and indirectly, to the Athens population as a whole. It should be a source of constant activity throughout the day, attracting crowds of local visitors in addition to tourists. Thus classical art could be approached not in awe alone but as part of everyday life in a bustling center.

In other words, the new Museum would be perceived as a unique urban design project, which dealt with the complexities of the built and social tissue of Athens rather than with the abstract design of a specific museum layout. De-emphasizing the monumental character of the project also meant that the burdensome ideological context of any such museum would be defused. If the Acropolis was to remain the eternal figure of the glory that was Greece - a new museum should be a contemporary response to modern needs, functional and symbolic, but never a threat to classical ruins.

Therefore, a definition of the project was needed, in the form of a "counter-competition". In this way, students would benefit in two ways: they would get involved with the historical layering of the Athens center, with all its savory and unsavory ingre-
diants, and they would escape the short-sightedness of yet another infill project.

The course, as planned, covered two semesters, from October 1988 till June 1989. This length of time enabled the class, some 54 students strong, to fulfill the following two parts of the project.

Firstly, a general appraisal of the Historical Center of Athens, which included its structural analysis from various relevant viewpoints to be selected by the students themselves. By the end of the first semester, in January 1989, the students had to submit a preliminary proposal for the Museum site, but most importantly, they had to formulate a set of conceptual guidelines, on which all further work would be based.

Secondly, an elaboration of the scheme chosen with an emphasis on the repercussions of adding the new museum to the existing urban tissue. Students were to submit the general layout of the wider area of the museum, at a scale 1:500 or 1:200, in order to determine basic circulation—external and internal—patterns and interconnections to existing or proposed clusters of amenities in the vicinity of the complex. They were also encouraged to work out all additional planning interventions needed to enhance the integration of the museum to the urban tissue.

We never took sides in class and never expressed a preference for a potential museum site. Instead, we repeatedly stressed the importance of overall consistency in the process of moving from "scope" to "proposal", and the relativity of a "definitive" or "plausible" solution to the problem. We also emphasized the absence of pre-determined criteria in architectural design, since everything depended on developing a convincing viewpoint about "truth". Students were thus encouraged to question "established" value systems and if needed, to revise them accordingly. For example, they could just as well tear out entire neighborhoods or hide their museum underground, provided their basic goals were met.

Students were thus forced to choose their own conceptual criteria and "invent" a corresponding presentation technique, within a framework of a few rudimentary rules, such as a standard panel size submitted at a fixed deadline. They were told that they would be judged solely on their ability to convey a number of chosen messages through a set of two- or three-dimensional tools.

All in all, six lectures were given by selected visitors, four interim discussion sessions were organized, in which drawings were evaluated, and two written exams were taken at the end of each term. Following each exam, students were asked to submit a critique of the course. The critiques were then typed together and returned to students for further discussion.

As proved in practice, we were fortunate to attract chance visitors, friends or mere passers-by, eager to participate in improvised discussions. Each class was totally unexpected as to its exact conclusion: we could start with a certain statement, intentionally provocative, and then allow the class to pick the cue. This highly improvised coursework helped create a warm climate, conducive to lively debate. Students were also encouraged to disrupt lectures with questions or remarks. Once an argument was presented, it was allowed to unfold in class without interruption. This sometimes led to endless discussions which engulfed a number
of seemingly unrelated issues, yet prominent in the students' mind. Admittedly, despite the persistent efforts to involve all students in such forms of participation, a number of them remained silent while a few monopolized the talking.

At the beginning, the class was apparently numbed by the unusual fluidity of the course, its poverty of imposed "rules". Students were at a loss and constantly tested us for the limits of our pronouncements. Yet this period of initial doubt was followed by rapid changes. Before the end of the first semester, it was apparent that most students felt largely responsible for what would eventually happen to the new Museum. Their sense of involvement was such that they volunteered to meet with members of the committee, still negotiating the competition brief, in an attempt to influence them. Those who happened to have chosen the vicinity of the Kerameikos ancient cemetery, as an appropriate site for the museum, formed an informal group and published a quite erudite article in a large-circulation newspaper.

Although urged to participate in the above initiatives, we refused to provide anything but information tips. We argued in class or in private that this was solely the students' responsibility and that our role was strictly supportive. We knew they had no chance to be heard by officials or even by the general public, but reasoned that there was more to be gained by testing the waters on their own. As expected, all such activities stressed the rightful duty of concerned citizens to express their opinion on major issues in the city we all live in. What we had not anticipated, however, was the manner in which the students' frustration would be directed against the course itself.

As time went by, the more active students in class began to openly question the way the course was taught. They thought that too much emphasis was placed on presentation techniques and little if any consideration was given to such issues as the context of the new Museum, its symbolic character, the design of modern museums and so on. They discarded the laissez-faire policy as unethical or irresponsible and demanded the imposition of stricter directives. In other words, they rejected the unusual degree of freedom allowed in class. They also refused to take a critical position of the major ideological premise involved, that is, to question the validity of the Acropolis as the eternal symbol of Humanity, in terms of its current exploitation by mass tourism and the indifference of the general public. In their opinion, the new Museum should express this universal symbolism above anything else.

The crisis culminated in the final presentation of projects, a marathon affair lasting seven hours. The procedure was interrupted by the intense attacks by some students, who accused us of keeping an evasive attitude in class and of avoiding to distinguish "right" from "wrong". The attack on moral principles was resumed later on, when students were asked to submit a written critique of the course. This was not enough for a number of them; they asked, and were granted on the spot, an additional meeting on the matter attended by about 15 students. A candid phrase overheard during this last unplanned meeting may convey the prevalent attitude: "I was always in the dark; sometimes I felt like a lightning struck and I could see things, and then, nothing again..."
As expected, the written critiques were almost evenly split. Half of the class praised the course and the other half was split between bewilderment and total or partial denial. Some even accused us of "manipulating" the class. Let me cite samples of the negative opinions first: "You should be proud of your role as a new doctor Mabuse. Fritz Lang is unhappy of never having met you..."; "your experiments rather failed..."; "you never really cared about students; those who get the message thrive, the rest are ignored". Now let me quote some positive opinions: "a stimulating course..."; "a course full of humor"; "it went beyond any expectation" and "provided food for thought"; "a democratic manner of expressing opinions"; "there are no recipes, each should try to find his truth deep inside himself"; "it will take a while for us to appreciate what was really offered by this course..."

The rich experience we gained in class, the lively exchanges and debates and the exceptionally good quality and originality of most of the projects submitted can be now summed in three conclusions concerning teaching Architecture in Greece.

First, students do not easily fit the widely accepted model of unconcerned, irresponsible do-nothings. If successfully challenged or even provoked, they are capable of demonstrating an impressive potential for fine work. Therefore, the so-called "crisis" of higher education-values is generated by instructors rather than by students.

Second, the more sensitive and perceptive students are the first to be affected by the prevalent spirit of dejection and cynicism, often prominent in classes. Their loss of faith forces them to hide behind a "metaphysical" approach to architecture, hence their rigid support of an ideological stance, smack of conservatism. Fear of the unknown is a major force behind their reaction; they have been spoiled by rampant verbalism and a simplistic attitude toward life that can only distinguish black from white.

Third, there seems to exist a confusion concerning the role of an instructor in class. Authoritarian rule goes generally unchallenged and students are supposed to be led by the hand. step by step, through the educational "maze". This is a relatively easy task for an instructor, who need not worry about side effects. Yet this automatically recreates conventional thought and leads to prefabricated knowledge which puts students' minds to sleep. If one tries to jump start such dormant situations, he is bound to face some extremely rough seas, sooner or later.

Still, in our opinion, it is worth the trouble, despite the risks involved.