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Introduction to: Being There - Reflections on 20 years of the International course at the Huddersfield Department of Architecture

Original Citation

Fellows, Richard and Meddings, Carl (2010) Introduction to: Being There - Reflections on 20 years of the International course at the Huddersfield Department of Architecture. In: Being There - Reflections on 20 years of the International course at the Huddersfield Department of Architecture. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK, pp. 5-7. ISBN 9781682180864

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INTRODUCTION

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The Huddersfield Department of Architecture had developed a degree course and was fully recognised by the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) by the early 1980s. However, aside from the personal predilections of individual staff members, and a strongly held belief that all buildings should be responsive to their sites, there was no sense of a distinguishing philosophy underlying the course, which marked it out from many other ‘recognised’ courses whose curricula were, of course, related to RIBA requirements.

A catalyst to change came in the middle of the decade through the publication of the *Esher Report*, (1984) a response by the RIBA to the then Government’s distrust of the professions and worries about restrictive practices. Allen Cunningham notes that it was “to counter government-based manpower planning pressure.” (2005:415-441) Although it appeared to be successful in that architects retained their professional examinations for qualification and courses were not reduced in length, this was at the expense of some schools of architecture which were threatened with de-recognition, apparently to appease the Government. In order to counter this threat, a new course was developed in Huddersfield which took a radical approach.

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At the time there was much discussion about how the general acceptance of the Modern Movement had led to an architecture which conformed to its own rules, but ignored the context in which it was set. This, together with the ubiquitous use of framed construction in steel and concrete, the development of building systems and standard components, removed any reference to ‘place’, except by the superficial copying of local styles. In addition the transport infrastructure based on roads which, even in urban areas, were responsive to the scale and speed of motor traffic, led many towns to become ‘anywhere and nowhere’. A scholarly response to this problem was provided by the development of the theory of ‘critical regionalism’, expounded most notably by Kenneth Frampton (1983). The theme was picked up and promulgated popularly in articles and features in influential magazines, such as *Architectural Review*. At a basic level, the movement aimed to provide places that belonged ‘somewhere’, and were rooted in a unique environment where local inhabitants felt that they belonged.

Huddersfield had a particular advantage from this point of view. Despite some modernisation – such as the introduction of the ring road in the 1960s – it was a town with a strong culture which was slow to change. The economy revolved around a high quality woollen textile industry which was mechanised in the 19th Century – and vigorous spin-offs from this in the growth of chemical and mechanical engineering industries. In physical terms, the town, on the edge of the Pennine hills, had a very distinctive topography to the south and the west with moorland, hills and valleys. Nearly all vernacular buildings, those of the 19th century and well into the 20th Century were built of the coarse grained sandstone – “millstone grit” – quarried in the

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surrounding countryside. The town grew out of its geological situation. The response of the architecture to the undulating terrain, the dry stone walls separating fields, and the great railway viaducts spanning the valleys, lead to a very distinctive visual environment. Consequently, the Department of Architecture was lucky enough to be located in an area with a real 'sense of place'. In addition, the beginnings of the trend for sustainability also lead to the re-use of heavy stone buildings, such as mills, which were 'long life, loose fit, low energy'.

The issues of urban alienation were also a problem worldwide. One aspect of the Modern Movement had been the emergence of the so-called 'International style', interpreted as though European Modernism could be transplanted anywhere in the world. In reality this meant that high-rise office and apartment blocks – often with glazed cladding – were beginning to be built across the globe. Prestigious and expensive though these may be, most were inappropriate culturally and physically, and spoke of the dominance of multi-nationals and western life style.

The need for new buildings, sympathetic to their locations, was especially championed by the Aga Khan awards for architecture, whose values were promulgated through the journal 'Mimar' (published by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 43 issues, 1981-1992). Appropriate work undertaken across the Islamic world, from the Middle East to South East Asia was discussed and illustrated.

The 'International' course at Huddersfield was developed with 'critical regionalism' and the values of the Aga Khan award in mind, with the need to provide an appropriate response to the physical, cultural and social conditions wherever development was required. This, of course, required intensive study and an understanding of the specific locality, its history and its social and cultural significance, as well as a consideration of constructional technique. In addition, in hot countries, an understanding of how environmental modification was traditionally effected was highly important.

The International course was developed by staff in the department with input from a number of specialists including, for instance, Michael Brammah, principal of a consultancy in urban design which was, through the EEC, experienced in reporting on urban development across the world.

Simultaneously, Peter Clements, the principal lecturer in architecture had been appointed via the Northern Consortium of the UK (an association of various universities in the north of England) to lead the development of a new architecture programme at Institute Technology Mara, based in Shah-Alam in Malaysia. His experience there, starting from the basis of a traditional RIBA course, and developing it to become appropriate to its social and cultural setting, was helpful in providing a background to course development. At that time, too, architects such as Ken Yeang were working to produce a modern Malaysian

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architecture. Peter's experience was invaluable, and when he returned to the UK in 1990, rejoined the course which was then in its second year.

The course was validated by the educational authorities and recognised by the RIBA. At first, students were recruited from many places, but as it gained strength, it also became mainstream for UK students. It was decided that subjects for the main field study, leading to the major third year comprehensive design project would be located within an unfamiliar environmental and social context.

The first overseas expedition for the new course took place in the academic year 1991-1992, when the first cohort of students reached the third year, by which time Dr Adenrele Awotona had been recruited as course director. Dr Awotona (now a senior member of staff at the University of Massachusetts, USA), was from Nigeria and had gained his PhD at Cambridge University. He organised the first study, taking with him two other members of staff for a six week visit centred on Calcutta (Kolkata) in India, where he had academic contacts. Immediately subsequent to this there were visits to Egypt, and then others in the Middle East, South East Asia and China.

In the years following, it was agreed that there would also be an 'overseas' component related to the Diploma Course (RIBA Part 2). In contrast to the BA, Diploma students travelled west, rather than east, and for the first few years, Dr Julia Dale lead study visits to Cuba, and then, subsequently to Ecuador and to Arizona in the USA.

The School's experience in the non-European area increased, and began to attract senior students from overseas to apply to undertake PhD studies related to topics connected to sustainable development, in particularly hot climates, and places with strong indigenous architectural traditions that were in danger from the imposition of western 'international' forms.

The Huddersfield International course has developed and prospered, and has given the School an identity which has attracted students at all levels.