Architectural Design as Knowledge Production: A Comparative Science and Technology Study of Design Teaching and Research at Different Architecture Schools

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Abstract : Questions of style and reproducibility in relation to architectural design are not only continuously debated; the very concepts can seem quite provocative to architects, who like to think of architectural design as depending on intuition, ideas, and individual personalities. This standpoint - dominant in architectural discourse - is challenged in the present paper presenting early findings from a comparative STS-inspired research study of architectural design teaching and research at different architecture schools in varying national contexts. In philosophy of science framework, the paper reflects empirical observations of design teaching at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen and presents a tentative theoretical framework for the on-going research project. The framework suggests that architecture – as a field of knowledge production – is mainly dominated by three epistemological positions, which will be presented and discussed. Besides serving as a loosely structured framework for future data analysis, the proposed framework brings forth the argument that architecture can be roughly divided into different schools of thought, like the traditional science disciplines. Without reducing the complexity of the discipline, describing its main intellectual positions should prove fruitful for the future development of architecture as a theoretical discipline, moving an architectural critique beyond discussions of taste preferences. Unlike traditional science disciplines, there is a lack of a community-wide, shared pool of codified references in architecture, with architects instead referencing art projects, buildings, and famous architects, when positioning their standpoints. While these inscriptions work as an architectural reference system, to be compared to codified theories in academic writing of traditional research, they are not used systematically in the same way. As a result, architectural critique is often reduced to discussions of taste and subjectivity rather than epistemological positioning. Architects are often criticized as judges of taste and accused that their rationality is rooted in cultural-relative aesthetical concepts of taste closely linked to questions of style, but arguably their supposedly subjective reasoning, in fact, forms part of larger systems of thought. Putting architectural 'styles' under a loop, and tracing their philosophical roots, can potentially open up a black box in architectural theory. Besides ascertaining and recognizing the existence of specific 'styles' and thereby schools of thought in current architectural discourse, the study could potentially also point at some mutations of the conventional – something actually 'new' – of potentially high value for architectural design education.

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