

JAPANESE ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION IN A NEO-LIBERAL* ERA.

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Education reflects the economic ambitions of each age.

In today's neo-liberal era, education has become a private good which allows a university graduate to compete in the career marketplace. This shift is at the heart of challenges to universities, not only in Japan, but throughout the world—but Japan's demographics deepen the difficulty of responding. Today, to a greater degree than has ever been true, many Japanese students studying architecture will not find jobs in the field—or in related fields like engineering and construction.

Architecture offers two educational paths to career success:

- Development of critical thinking and accumulated expertise, exploiting comfort with scientific ways of reasoning. This path is valued by large and powerful organizations: corporations like Nikken Sekkei or contractors like Takenaka Komuten and Shimizu Kensetsu.
- Entrepreneurial exploitation of an artistic expression of architecture, a path reflected in the starpower of a Kazuyo Sejima or a Kengo Kuma.

Japan's universities are better at accommodating the second career path, even though only a very few will achieve success in this way: schools emphasize the tools of media savvy and celebrity, such as clearly communicated diagrams and eye-catching, but easily accessible, ideas. By uncritically celebrating students' and recent graduates' architectural output in short-lived forms such as installations or artwork—even when these results are fleeting or flimsy—educators demonstrate the importance they place on this path to success. Teaching architecture as an art, notably, is also inexpensive in major urban areas, with a ready supply of underpaid practicing architects available to teach as contingent faculty. This is not unimportant; Japan's universities are underfunded compared to comparable institutions in other nations.

While older adults realize the odds of success in a media-oriented, “star-architect” system are slim, young people are not so world-wise. For students, the tools needed and rewards offered under such a system are familiar ones, made more so by their access to these part-time teachers. But these teachers, underchallenged by their institutions and interchangeable in their contributions, should, in fact, be a warning regarding odds of success. Too often, to students, the art of architecture appears to be an easy, accessible career path—and, with designers less than a decade out of schools featured in magazines and active in art galleries, it suggests a rapid rise to prominence and influence.

In contrast to the artistic approach to architecture, developing rigorous thinking and the accumulation of expertise is a challenge—both for students and their schools—even if the potential rewards for both student and society are greater. Science, social science and technology are better able to address the critical challenges facing Japanese society today—energy costs, social isolation, and an aging population, to name only a few. Many students are aware of the need to develop their individual intellectual strengths and are demanding more of their education; they know that a student who is well educated in a specialty, with a broad understanding of the best international practices, will remain of value to society. In some schools, students do enjoy superficial exposure to the scientific solutions to social concerns; a small subpopulation is fortunate enough to find themselves associated with a scholar who has expertise to offer.

But in Japan, this approach to the study of architecture remains underdeveloped and internationally uncompetitive. The situation will not be easy to change.

First: for a long time, Japanese universities could not specialize; under governmental guidance, universities selected staff to reflect the broad range of concerns within the field of architecture and construction. Those restrictions have been lifted; universities are now encouraged to develop unique profiles. But it will be some time before many can do so; faculty composition changes slowly, a professor usually staying in one setting for several decades.

And the presence of a single specialist, the understandable result of institutions' long-standing efforts to be broad, presents problems, no matter how wonderful the scholar's work. Under a sole specialist, graduate students willing to commit the time to developing an expertise (an unusually small subset of the student population) all too often quickly progress from general principles to minor points of interest in their mentors' work—which may, ironically, mean a student's understanding and expertise is too narrow to be of career value outside of academe. Lacking access to a complementary community of scholars, lacking a clear curricular ladder for learning, students often remain ignorant of a broadly comprehensive view. Building these communities of experts, and establishing systems to encourage collaboration instead of faculty autonomy, will take time.

Second: Japan has not nurtured a competitive class of architectural specialists, although there are clearly exceptions. Japanese professors balance research with the responsibilities of teaching and administration (the latter, I think, more time-consuming than in many countries). Sabbaticals and research leaves, offering opportunities for a scholar to deeply concentrate on advancing expertise, are difficult to accommodate in the autonomous setting of a Japanese research lab headed by a single scholar. There is comparatively modest financial and physical support for sophisticated research as well. A mid-level or senior Japanese educator is, as a result, less likely than those in much of the developed world to be able to spend time learning new tools and technologies. When scholars cannot renew and update knowledge, they share with students only increasingly inconsequential expertise.

Third: universities in Japan today are not able to demand students develop rigor or expertise. With a declining student-age population, there is a place in higher education for everyone interested. Universities are unwilling to expect much from students, for fear of driving applicants to competing colleges. Failing students is frowned upon; attendance is an option, not an expectation. In spite of the appalling waste, learning is not the primary reason many students attend college (a problem in my country as well). As a result, many, perhaps most, young people remain unprepared and uncompetitive; Japan's universities cannot demand they do better.

There is, as a result, a mismatch between the needs of competitive corporations and Japanese students' training. Fewer and fewer graduates are being hired at the end of a university education, and many that are hired are essentially considered unworthy of investment, employed only under various forms of short-term contracts.

Japan's linguistic isolation maintained this situation in the face of economic decline; the nation's faculty and students competed where foreigners were at a disadvantage. But in today's economy, the nation's leaders, whether architects working within the art of architecture or corporations exploiting technological tools, have been forced to compete internationally to survive. Many offices once firmly rooted in Japan have established branches abroad. They now require not only the intellectual tools outlined above, but, *in addition*, international savvy. And it is Japan's children who are at the disadvantage; again, Japan's universities are unprepared for the challenge.

But unlike earlier eras, when architects and contractors in Japan's major cities had to accept graduates shaped by the nation's universities because they had no alternative, today industry leaders are hiring increasing numbers of foreign workers, even workers whose Japanese language skills are unsophisticated.

And even so, Japan's young people are shunning study abroad: the numbers dropped over 10 percent between 2009 and 2010, while corporations were clamoring for individuals with international experience. Again, this points to systematic failures: Japanese forms of international study have always been *ad hoc* and casual, closer in spirit to a sensual "Grand Tour" than an intellectual effort with clear pedagogical goals. Time abroad is time away, away from the long period of job hunting and opportunities to network, away from home and family. Professors, themselves isolated from international intellectual communities, are of little help in assisting students in understanding what to learn abroad, or what to do with new and differing bodies of knowledge on their return to Japan.

As an alternative, universities like Waseda and the Tokyo Institute of Technology have established international communities at home, where English is the primary language of education. But this, I would argue, is of greater benefit to the non-Japanese student who will work for a Japanese corporation or client than it is for a Japanese student with international ambitions. It offers, for example, little understanding of how to maintain international ties to intellectual leaders in other nations over time, or insight into the expectations normal in other nations. Japanese professors and their students remain internationally isolated even as they are surrounded by an increasingly international cohort of students from abroad.

Some will ask: must business get what business wants? There is ample reason to be concerned about Darwinian developments in education, where work that does not have obvious market value is immediately assumed to have no value at all. But of even greater concern is the collapse of clear career paths for Japan's students in architecture. Is their lack of competitiveness and loss of long-term economic opportunity okay?

* Neo-liberalism, a.k.a. neoliberalism / ネオリベリズム
NOT, please, 「新自由主義」.

An economic approach that favors globalization and reduced government (limiting regulation and resources), and transferring opportunity and risk to individuals, who are assumed to have access to "perfect" information.