

Diversity in Architectural Education: Teaching and learning in the context of Diversity

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A brief overview of the diversity of the profession

While creative professionals, including architects, account for about 7% of UK workforce, it may surprise the reader to learn that diversity and Equality are considered 'taboo' words in architectural education. That may be because most architects consider themselves to be liberal and creative and therefore, above what is considered as 'political correctness'. However, statistics tell a different story. At present, there are only 17% women architects¹ while the percentage for Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) is too small to be a part of the statistics. Less than 8% of women own their practices and number of female professors or Heads of Schools can be counted in one hand. However, these figures do not bear any relationship with the student numbers from both female and BAME backgrounds². Diversity in student body of UK are well represented in architecture. However expression of Architectural Diversity- both in the end products of graduates and buildings- is not.

The first woman was admitted to the Royal Institute of British architects (RIBA) in 1898 after a hotly debated council meeting where Ethel Charles won vote of 51 for and 16 against. This was not a question of merit but pure prejudice- Charles was holder of the RIBA Silver Medal (1905) and winner of international awards. A year later, her sister, Bessie Ada Charles, in 1890 became the second female architect member of the RIBA. An attempt was made to reverse the decision a few months later- the sisters triumphed again, this time winning by one vote. Nearly ninety years later in 1985, a group of male and female architects established the Women

¹ In 1999, this was 8%.

² We do not have any figures for disabled architects or those from different sexual orientation. Nevertheless they exist but not in great numbers.

Architects Forum- at this point, less than 5% of chartered architects were female. An exhibition about the work of women architects brought public attention for the first time to the issue of gender and architecture. In 1993, the Women Architects Group was established as a special Interest group within the RIBA. In 1999, it became independent of the RIBA and renamed itself Women In Architecture. Architects For Change was set up in 2000 as the RIBA's first equality forum. From then on, Women In Architecture, Society of Black Architects, Architects For Change the students' forum and other such groups have operated under the umbrella of Architects For Change.

It was only in the year 2000 that RIBA adopted an Equal Opportunities policy for its staff. It is not yet mandatory for members of RIBA to have equal opportunity policies. The statistics of female and BAME architects may seem perverse for a profession that is so dependent upon public patronage-51% of the UK population is female (London figure is 52%) while 7% of the population comes from a BAME background. So while there is approximately one architect per 2000 people in the UK, they are not reflective of the society in which they work. It is not hard to understand why consequently, often architects may be seen as isolated figures, removed from the lives of the general public- described as a middle class profession with mainly white and middle aged men³. This picture is very different from other public professions such as medicine, accountancy and the law, which support a vibrant and diverse body of practitioners from all backgrounds.

The teaching of architecture: the student body

In order to understand why diversity is not making an impact on architecture, it is vital to examine architectural education. What do we mean by diversity in architecture ? Diversity in architectural education takes many forms- manifest in the student body, the course or syllabus, andragogical issues and in the creative act of designing and building. The complexity and richness of architectural design contrasts with its other aspect- the 'practical and scientific side'. Architecture

³ A survey carried out in 1994 by RIBA Journal reported that 74% of the UK population could not identify any architects or buildings designed by them.

then, simply due to its nature, cannot be standardized. This is unlike other professional courses where the output is standardized all over the world, say for example, medicine or engineering. Design is specific to the context and client and many variables such as aesthetics, environmental conditions, etc are involved. This makes the architectural course extremely demanding and complex.

In the home students category, BAME students are well represented on architecture courses, making up around 18% of all architecture undergraduates (compared to 16% of all undergraduates), and that some communities, for example Chinese, are represented (at first degree level) above their representation in the population as a whole. There are 30% female students on architecture courses. However, as seen from the professional statistics given before, there is a substantial drop out of both female⁴ and BAME students. There are also mature students, especially in the Diploma- who may take time out to work, gain experience, raise family or become a carer before commencing studies again.

The RIBA encourages overseas students to apply to study at UK institutions. The revenue from overseas students is of prime economic importance to most Universities, especially to Schools of Architecture. According the Independent⁵, coming years will see an annual 8% rise in overseas students in the UK. International students bring with them higher fees- worth 60 billion pounds, says the 2008 survey from the International Graduate Insight Group.

London in particular attracts a great diversity of students- both from home and abroad. In the Faculty of Architecture and Spatial Design at London Metropolitan University, where I teach, I have counted as much as 40% female students and 30% BAME students in the undergraduate years and similar percentages in the post graduate (Diploma) course.

The teaching of architecture: the course

⁴ Why Women Leave architecture, RIBA commissioned research 2003.

⁵ March 2008.

Architecture is considered as one of professional 'hard' courses where it is estimated that each student will spend more than 34 hours per week average in studies⁶. To qualify as an architect, it takes more than seven years of studies and apprenticeship⁷. There is an undergraduate part of the course, called the RIBA I and a postgraduate, often called Diploma or RIBA II after which there is professional studies or RIBA III. These three parts are interspersed with work experience periods. Further like medicine, the course is expensive with material outlays and study trips abroad. Finance is one of the reasons cited in the 2003 CABE study of Minority Ethnic students and Architecture, as to why BAME architectural students tend to drop out of studies.⁸

The teaching of architecture remains extremely 'personalized' or one to one, ie through tutorials, and 'crits', rather than anonymously marked essays or exams like those in other professions. Often the student will join one studio unit and stay there for one year under the guidance of a tutor who may have a personal view of design or architecture. There is hardly any scope for anonymous marking, although many think it can have a important impact on the results of a student⁹. Architectural teaching is primarily through the form of 'crits' where students pin up their work and invited critics take turn to make points and suggestions about the work. This could potentially become a very important source of ideas for the student but research from Strathclyde University suggests that often crits turn into "an arena where sexism and machoism prevails".¹⁰

Despite the diverse body of students and nature of the course, the tutors are mainly white, older middle class men. At a recent meeting of 89 RIBA Part III

⁶ National Union of Students survey quoted in Daily Telegraph, 25th November 2008. Soft courses are Media studies, journalism etc where students may spend less than 24 hours per week in study.

⁷ Architecture course consists of generally speaking 3 years (RIBA Part I) +year out+ two years diploma (RIBA Part II) + year out + RIBA III exams. There are variations, for example in Scotland, the course is Four years and then year out, then Diploma, then RIBA III.

⁸ This also impacts on the working classes- architecture remains for and by the well off and middle classes.

⁹ The teaching of Architecture, Strathclyde University research paper, 1998.

¹⁰ Ibid.

examiners, I counted only 2.8% female and 0.25% BAME tutors.¹¹ There are only four female Heads of school in the 45 schools of architecture in the UK. Female professors in architecture are likewise four. With Ruth Reed becoming at the first female RIBA President and Angela Brady, as incoming president, 2010 has seen sweeping changes in the RIBA. 2008 had a RIBA President of Indian origin, there are no heads of school from BAME origin or professors. Despite these three examples, there still is a lack of accessible role models for aspiring female and BAME architecture students. This has been pointed out in the 2003 RIBA research and the CABA study of 2003.¹²

Many schools of architecture, now have studio units that work abroad and engage with students abroad. A new area is that of social and cultural engagement within the built environment along with shelter re-construction and disaster management in areas of natural and man made disasters. Thus a great variety of cultural influences form a part of an architecture student's life. However, according to many BAME tutors and architects¹³, overseas students coming to the UK, are taught that Western design are more "progressive". This has an effect of not only diminishing the cultural input that a student brings¹⁴ but creating a progressive Westernisation of architecture. These students upon their return from UK and other western countries, tend to design in the Western style in their home countries. Doris Salcedo, the Columbian artist, says- "Modernity is seen as an exclusively European event in which self-cultivation of the human mind through exercise of reason and the study of classics had its main purpose the creation of a homogenous, rational and beautiful society... in this narration, colonial and imperial history has been disregarded, marginalised or simply obliterated.

The impact of colonialism, neo imperialism and importance diverse architectural heritage is not taught at most Schools. It is felt by BAME tutors that the syllabus and the teaching still remains too 'euro-centric'. *"I find that architectural teaching in*

¹¹ RIBA III examiners meeting, RIBA, November 2008.

¹² Why Women leave architecture 2003, RIBA and CABA study of BAME students, 2003.

¹³ From the discussion following the presentation of "If we were Pandas" a paper by Elsie Ouwsu, architect at the CABA offices, 2003.

¹⁴ Balkrishna Doshi, 1997, Contemporary Architecture and City form

the UK is stuck in the past. It is kind of strange, I look around- I see there are students from all backgrounds, not just white, and then I look at what they are studying and the language being used- it could be from the 1940's"- says Lesley Lokko, architect, teacher, author and cultural commentator¹⁵. Like bio-diversity, diversity in architecture is a dying species, replaced by bland 'glocal' architectural styles.

The subtle dismissal of non-Western designs or context has been something I have personally observed during teaching. During one of our 'crits' in February 2008 showcasing the work in India, an invited critic, asked- "So what are you going to do when you work in the real world ?" He then went on to define the real world as being London, Vienna, and other places in Europe. Although most people appreciate the work of our students as being worthy, there is often a sharp intake of breathe, followed a silence, as critics do not know how to assess such work. In my opinion and experience, there are sometimes more oblique ways of dismissing any rigorous cultural examination. This takes place in the following ways- comparing it to a western context, asking students to study a western architect whose work has no relevance to the design brief, not examining 'non Western' examples of architecture, etc.

Diversity in Architectural Design- ways forward

Diversity in architecture can come from not only the people in it but also from the influences on the end product. Western music, food, art and fashion have benefited greatly from being influenced by non-Western elements. This 'fusion' has resulted in them being more in tune with the general public. In the UK, while 7% of the population is from minority ethnic background but architecture and its teaching remains staunchly white and European. Why not architecture ?

To encourage creativity and diversity in architecture, diverse ways have to be used as well-

¹⁵ Lesley Lokko, quoted by architect Ann De Graft Johnson at an international conference- Inspire2Aspire, 2008.

1. **Discourses, exhibitions and events** encouraging students to look at architectural design from diverse points of view. Women In Architecture and Architects For Change have pioneered a traveling architecture exhibition that catalogues work of architects from different countries and cultures- DiverseCity. Through the introduction of non- Western models of design and interventions¹⁶, students can see that diversity in design is an ongoing process and a creative one. Kenneth Frampton, architectural commentator talks about learning from each other- *"It is one of the ironies of the interrelationship between the so-called First and Third Worlds that Indian architects categorically demonstrated very comparable alternate land settlement patterns that could with minor adaptation have been employed equally effectively in both worlds. It is also significant and yet an understandably ironic fact that this remarkable production has also been largely ignored by the Western world."*¹⁷
2. **Examining cultural fusions and influences from diverse sources.** Examples include the highly eccentric Victorian Brighton Pavilion, the 'Bungalow' from the vernacular domestic architecture of Bengal, etc. Critically examining the contextual issues in location encourages students to think about the environment and styles. Balkrishna Doshi, the eminent Indian architect, writes- *"The realization that International models of architecture, were not suitable, given varying resources, climatic conditions, values, lifestyles and lifestyles, has given rise to healthy debate in recent times. This has also encouraged all societies to look into their own heritage to understand the architectural and planning practices which have evolved over centuries of adaptation and in some cases, even adoption."*

¹⁶ In my lectures, I use examples, situations, illustrations come from all sources. In a lecture on sanitation, I may discuss the Chinese invention of toilet paper, use of the flushing toilet in ancient middle eastern cultures and the first ever planned urban sewage systems of India and Pakistan. This is in marked contrast to a colleague giving an impression that urban sanitation was a Western invention by showing a squatter settlement in Africa and contrasting that with a bathroom in the UK.

¹⁷ Contemporary Architecture and City Form: the South Asian Paradigm, 1997.

3. **Use of positive and diverse influences and role models within education and practice.** These include not only architects and academics but also non-architects and in particular real life situations, the stakeholders. This encourages the student to think in 'real world'. In 2008, we worked on a design project in Uxbridge Road and Shepherds Bush, itself called the most diverse street in London. As critics, we had the Chair of the Market Traders, local stakeholders, Chair of another market in London- and others, including architects. These critics were able to contribute a wide variety of knowledge and experience, thus adding a dose of reality and diversity to the design process. By encouraging more women and BAME architects to teach, we can provide positive and supportive environments and role models to students.

4. **Diverse teaching methods that involve student centred learning.** We have used Peer assessment extensively where other students are invited to crit other students. Given that our students come from such different backgrounds, it has become a very useful exercise to take into account different cultural background and the wider 'experiential' learning of each student.

By acknowledging that creative design springs from diverse bodies of knowledge found in all cultures, sexes and ages, we are able to have a richer architecture for it. The influences of women, children, older people in our built environment need to be acknowledged and respected. Acknowledging that a lot of what is called 'primitive' and backward could be actually more sustainable and appropriate. Using my experiences as a mother, Indian and immigrant have become useful tools in understanding with compassion the universality of our lives while acknowledging the diversity of our actions. Professor AnnaLee Saxenian has coined the term, 'Brain circulation' as opposed to Brain drain. She talks of the experience of immigrant workers (or students- my addition) returning and bringing with them new skills to revitalize their home nations. Whether they are overseas or home students, 'Brain

circulation' could apply to the time an architecture student spends at a School of Architecture, returning their places of work to use their creative skills there.

Biographical note

Sumita Sinha is a practising architect and academic who has worked as an architect and community consultant in India, France, Spain, Venezuela and the UK. She is a Civic Trust assessor and sits on a number of panels advising on education, design and sustainability. Sumita teaches architecture and technology at universities in the UK and abroad, and is a Science, Engineering and Technology ambassador. She is a visiting lecturer for Delhi School of Planning and Architecture , external examiner for Birmingham University, member of the RIBA validation Panel and RIBA Part III examiner.

Sumita is the founder of Architects For Change, the Equality Forum for British Architects and past Chair of Women In Architecture. Her published works include those in the fields of design, work practices and community planning. Sumita's awards include the UIA:UNESCO International award, Marley Environmental Initiatives award, and National Training award. Sumita received Women In Business award in 2002 and Ford Diversity award in 2004. In 2003, her portrait was included in an exhibition about 28 women who had made difference to the life and culture of Britain. Sumita received the 2008 Atkins Inspire award for Architecture.