

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT

by
MICHAEL DAVID SORKIN
B.A., University of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois
June 1969
M.A., Columbia University
New York, New York
June 1971

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE
REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE AT
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June 1984

[c] Michael David Sorkin 1984

The author hereby grants to M.I.T. permission to reproduce and to
distribute copies of this thesis document in whole or in part.

Signature of author

Michael Sorkin, Department of Architecture May 8, 1984

Certified by

Imre Halasz, Prof. of Architecture, Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by

Rosemary Grimshaw, Chairman, Departmental Committee on
Graduate Students

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE
OF TECHNOLOGY

JUN 1 1984

LIBRARIES

10116

Some Impressions of the Department

by
Michael David Sorkin

Submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 8, 1984 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture

ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises a series of impressions of the Department of Architecture, garnered after a long absence from M.I.T. These impressions are meant as an intervention in the Department's current self-analysis and debate over the future of architectural education. Comments are drawn from the experience of several visits, from discussions with students and faculty, and from a reading of a number of the texts produced as part of the on-going process of curricular review. Additional commentary is provided on the author's sense of the portrait of the Department currently dominant in the profession generally. Finally, a number of suggestions as to possible futures for the Department are provided.

Thesis Supervisor: Imre Halasz
Title: Professor of Architecture

Table of Contents

How I Came to Go to MIT.....4
Looking Back At It.....11
Another Perspective.....12
A Visit to MIT.....19
A Reading Of A Departmental Text.....25
What Is To Be Done?.....29
Envoi.....32

This paper is no more than a series of impressions - presented as fragments - of several recent encounters I've had with the Department of Architecture. It's meant as a friendly intervention in the Department's current self-analysis. In some senses, it deals mainly with the constitution of the Department's image. In this regard, it stands apart from the traditional documentary evidences of curricular review or academic examination. By contrast, this is a memoir, a view of the Department in highly filtered form. These are my views, unbuttressed by statistical verification or even the vaguer forms of consensus.

How I Came To Go To MIT

Since this is a memoir, I'll begin with a short tale of origins. When I was an undergraduate in 1968, making my decisions about where to apply to architecture school, I included MIT among my applications because it was one of the standard choices, one to the "top schools." Besides MIT, I sent applications to Harvard, Columbia, Yale, and Pennsylvania. I was admitted to all of these schools. I chose Harvard for a number of reasons: because it was "Harvard" and at some sort of cultural epicenter; because of Cambridge which seemed an experience not to be missed; because I had a high-school friend who was there and urged it on me;

and because the head of the first year program was a University of Chicago graduate and presented the school as friendly to the life of the mind. All of these reasons were essentially peripheral to questions of architecture.

In addition, my choices were aided by a number of disincentives provided by the other schools. Penn was in Philadelphia and Yale in New Haven, two localities that stuck me as utterly uninhabitable. Columbia I never really considered, in part because of discouragement from people I knew there, in part because of its then relatively undistinguished reputation, in part because I was on the point of deciding to delay going to architecture school to pursue graduate studies in literature and had chosen to do this at Columbia where I'd gotten a plush fellowship. MIT was never really in the running. First, because I was daunted by it's being a technical school. This both in the sense that I thought that the campus atmosphere would be uncongenial to a liberal arts type like myself and in that I was worried that the architecture curriculum would unduly stress scientific subjects which I was loathe to pursue. Finally, as someone who had been active politically in college days and before, MIT seemed, in the phrase of the times, to be the belly of the monster, rife with war research and repressive attitudes.

So I went to Harvard and hated it almost immediately. When I first arrived I was not out of sympathy with the general line of the place, the deracinated CIAM vision that stood in for any measured ideology in those days. I thought of architecture as primarily a social art and saw the locus of its disciplines with the kind of analysis I had become familiar with and adept at during my undergraduate and graduate years. I also instinctively associated the academic setting and norms that were characteristic of my previous experience. What shocked me immediately on arriving at the G.S.D. was the - to me - grotesquely low level of the discourse that was proffered. Equally, I was shocked that the faculty with which I was having contact was so consistently intellectually underequipped. What passed for analysis seemed to me to be a scandal.

The degraded intellectual base of the school appeared all pervasive. The theory course was nothing of the kind; the history course was conducted as chronological litany; structures was a necessary chore but the teaching was disorganized and incompetent, the instructor the butt of jokes; the sociology was vulgar. The heroes of the school were hardly inspiring: Sert was venerated while Frank Lloyd Wright (I'd lived for two years next to Robie House and had it in the blood) was a pariah. Studio was simply a summary of

these attitudes. Formal criteria were largely absent which forced discussion back on bankrupt models. I was in a rage, my teachers held no authority. Not only were they seemingly less read and conscious than I of the non-graphic components of the architectural discourse, they were no designers, had no work, no position about work. More, they seemed too young, as a group, for their positions. I'd been accustomed to and accepting of the hierarchies of expertise in great liberal arts institutions and expected that these criteria were valid as well at harvard (where the self-congratulation at belonging seemingly never ceased.) The experience grew ever more loathsome and I grew ever more obnoxious.

MIT presented itself as the alternative. Many of us that year cross-registered for a variety of courses (which was difficult given Harvard's prescribed curriculum) and the simple discovery of an alternative proved to be a breath-taking thing. Once inside the doors of the place, I quickly realized that a number of my initial ideas about MIT were unfounded. The orientation wasn't overwhelmingly technical, a certain species of idiosyncrasy seemed to thrive, and the social outlook of the place - especially in the Planning Department - was - in large measure - sympathetic. My fears about the Institute as a whole were also assuaged by the discovery of an old friend who was then a student in the Linguistics

Department, whose tone I found bracing - both intellectually and politically. I resolved almost immediately to make the switch - even initiating inquiries in my first semester, too late for that year. My resolve was strengthened come the end of academic year when my instructors at Harvard made it clear to me that I was no longer wanted around there.

During my MIT years - which were enjoyable in the main - I never quite escaped the feeling of not quite fitting in. This was probably for a number of reasons. Certainly, I never was able to identify with a "class" at the school and missed out on some of the solidarity that seems so essential a part of architectural education. As I mentioned earlier, my main identifications within the school were with the Planning Department and with the historical/theoretical axis of architectural instruction, an orientation which tended to push me away from the studio. I also had some trouble seeing myself as a student in those years and had strong identification outside MIT. Indeed, one of my main activities during one year was organizing a Radical Environmental Design (REDs, get it) conference which was held in the Department but with little participation by it. All of which is to say that my orientation within the profession of architecture, which tended to deemphasize design, was retained throughout my MIT years.

One of the reasons for this, I think, was the small degree of resistance this (I now believe) myopic view met at MIT. Although more sympathetically, architectural design was still held answerable - at all levels - to some sort of social test. Indeed, the activity of design was infused with this sort of idea about purpose. This is not to say that the physical component of design was altogether ignored, simply that there seemed - to me at any rate - to be a tacit acknowledgment of a prior, always invocable question. As one of the question's adepts, I felt comfortable manipulating it. It was not until some years later that I came to see these manipulations as evasions of something very fundamental as well.

Of course, I overstated and distorted the case. I don't by any means aim to imply that MIT was, at that time, barren of any design ethos. Indeed, one of my early, galvanizing experiences of MIT while I was still at Harvard, came through a classmate of mine who was sitting in on Maurice Smith's first year studio. While there was a certain attempt on the part of our instructors to portray the work that emerged as hopelessly eccentric, its charisma shined through. When I made the switch myself, Smith's studio was the first that I took. At the time, I was impressed by the rigor of the approach and stimulated by seeing issues of design treated

with such discipline. I became a partial convert. I say convert because the Smith-praxis was always suffused with a quasi-spiritual overtone, visible in Smith's unorthodox and self-indulgent manner of literary expression and in the way students seemed to fall naturally into patterns of discipleship. And I say partial because I was never fully convinced that the discipline was other than hermetic, never able (beyond the level of pedagogy) to see how it all "fit in" with the larger array of my concerns.

If there was a problem with all of this it wasn't with Maurice Smith, his opinions, or his methods. The difficulty, I think was with the context in which they were situated. In the absence of any other equally strongly constituted design ethos, the Maurice method became isomorphic with the "MIT" method. There was simply nothing as convincing in its conviction or comprehensiveness on the scene identifying itself as design. To my eye, to be a "designer" at MIT meant to embrace this particular ideology both at the level of object and in terms of its larger superstructure which embraced the dominant life style at the school at the time: the bib-overalled, carpentry, rural, craft-oriented manner which seemed to come with the territory. Metropolitan me found this more than I was able to swallow.

I left MIT, then, with happy if not precisely stimulating memories. At parting there was no memory that struck me as seminal but a good number that seemed constructive. The experience was not integrated by any overall impression but remained one of fragments. This, indeed, was how I'd encountered the school during the time I was there, prompted in part by the way I chose to receive my education and in part, I think, by the character of the institution. In truth, the school had never really seemed to be "about" anything, either in terms of some unifying polemic or even in terms of some perceptible undercurrent predisposition. It was not, in the idiom, a "design" school, a "trade" school, or a "technical" school. Still, I certainly thought it was a good school, vastly better than the one I'd previously attended.

Looking Back At It

In the years after I left MIT, I've approached architecture from a variety of directions. My first two jobs were emblematic: one working as an architect bureaucrat for the City of New York administering/designing in a community based program to open and run a large number of day care centers for the elderly and another as a "consultant" in the Design Department of the Museum of Modern Art. I next worked for a firm of "advocacy" architects which had grown out of the

Columbia University strike of 1968. Then I got a job teaching at the Architectural Association in London. While there I began to write regularly on architectural subjects, often for the journal produced at the school, Architectural Association Quarterly. So the character of my involvement in the profession established itself as a three part practice: teaching (currently Yale and Cooper Union, previously Columbia, the University of Texas, and Renssalaer plus very extensive lecturing); writing (for many professional and general magazines and journals, including a long stint as critic as the Village Voice); and designing (furniture, interiors, competitions, paper architecture for the galleries.) I offer this prolegomena as evidence of a relatively special situation, one that has put me in touch not simply with developments in architecture and the character of its practice but with a large number of the schools. My thinking about the problems and character of "architectural education" has been continuous and practical and I offer my observations from that perspective.

Another Perspective

The years since I left MIT have been both a disaster and a time of replenishment for the architectural profession and for the larger social construction of the very idea of

architecture. The reinvestment of a theoretical and historic basis for practice (or at least of the idea of the relevance of such a basis) has been striking. Equally the reappearance of the art for art's motive within the larger discourse has significantly deformed the landscape of the profession. I take these developments to be essentially salubrious and invigorating, natural descriptions of absences which were endemic during the period when I was a student.

However, such advances in consciousness have been balanced by other tendencies which have a far less positive import, which, indeed, in many cases have the effect of negating the positive aspects of the new openings to history, theory, and form. Most prominently, I've been struck by the almost complete disappearance of the idea of architecture as a social practice. This has proceeded through the purging of curricular, faculty, community programs, and involvement at the most manifest level and through many other less schematic transformations in the academic environment. I've noticed, for example, a striking growth in frivolous and artificially de-socialized programs in design studios.

Recently, I had lunch with the Dean of the Yale School of Architecture and discussion came around to the state of the schools. After predictable exchanges about the growing trend

to homogeneity, my companion remarked that of all the major schools, the one about which he knew virtually nothing was MIT. He was particularly struck by the fact that he could recall seeing no MIT graduates among the applicants for work in his professional office, a fairly sought-after spot among "design" oriented graduates.

Of course, this remark cuts both ways. One might, on the one hand, argue that MIT graduates feelingly disdain the corporate design setting, however refined the expressive product. On the other - and this seemed to be the vague and unspoken implication of the remark - one might conclude that MIT graduates were either unprepared or unmotivated to enter the real world of professional practice. Either way, however, the importance of the observation - which strikes me as reasonably widespread - is in the fact that there is a perception that MIT is training students who are somehow an exception to the expectation one might normally have of the products of prestige, \$10,000 a year, institutions.

What strikes me as remarkable in my observations of MIT from the extra-mural environment is the degree to which this perception is general. Even more remarkable, though, seems to be the degree to which there's no sense of the qualities in which this difference resides. Having taught at a large

number of schools now, and having been in contact with many more, it seems to me equally true of students and faculty that MIT is virtually a school without a reputation. It's institutional cachet seems to reside almost entirely in either ineffable or misinformed notions. It's one of the "good" schools, one understands, but beyond this, little. Alternatively, one hears of a technical reputation (guilt for association), about "social" issues (some form of nostalgia), about faculty once associated with the school, about nothing that seems especially current. The one exception seems to be the history/theory component of the school whose faculty seem to be more in the "public" view and whose reputation is undoubtedly advanced by the activism of the MIT Press as a source of architectural texts.

I want to stress that I impute nothing negative to the idea of a school "different" from all the others. Indeed, in view of the mounting interchangeability of the institutions of architectural education, difference of almost any sort would seem to be a quality devoutly to be wished. More, my own inclination is for a place that's deliberate about the qualities that set it apart. The norm today seems to be a mindless pluralism, an empty formalism completely lacking theoretical or ethical underpinnings. Under the impact of the current maunderings of the profession, even the formal aspects

of this new formalism seem strikingly underdeveloped. There's a general want of rationale, little beyond the weak pap of liberal mindedness.

All of this is to say that schools are (and should) be known in two ways. First by the array of forms (we're talking about architecture schools after all) with which they're associated. And second, by the aura which surrounds and explicates such formal production. There's simply no escaping association with tendency. The discourse within architecture is too lively and articulate to make anything else possible. If architectural tendency can be said to be conjoined form and rationale, the situation at MIT seems to resist such classification on both counts, at least from the perspective of an outsider. It isn't only that one can't pin down what the place stands for, one can't even begin to discern what it looks like.

What about "Built Form" an unseen interlocutor asks. Isn't this the MIT method? For reasons I've alluded to earlier, I think that Built Form has an ambivalent relationship to the twin test of tendency I've just contrived. The over-riding difficulty, I think, is it's invisibility. Whether or not a body of work actually exists, it simply has not been cogently identified. No persuasion - visible outside of the school -

has been offered on its behalf. Never mind that it may embrace traditional Japanese architecture, Italian Hill Towns and Herman Herzberger, its coherence can hardly be adduced from a handful of Maurice's epigrams. Indeed the epigrammatic basis of its unity condemns it, at the very least, to the suspicion of eccentricity.

Naturally, the counter argument can be posed that "Built-Form" is not meant as an historical construct, that the delineation of its corpus is beside the point, that what we're talking about here is a pedagogy. This is an argument with which I have some sympathy. My own experience as a student was positive and memorable in this regard: the Built-Form "approach" struck me as both analytically useful and an efficient and purposeful means of organizing the discipline of class-room exercises. It also seemed to provide the beginnings of a working method with larger possibilities. But it was at this edge that the Built-Form "idea" grew fuzzy. It not only offered too incoherent an account of its possibilities and situation, it seemed to delight in a vagueness which was not really consciousness expanding, simply vague.

The fuzziness at the edge of Built-Form was (and is, I think) only exacerbated by its situation within the school. The

Built-Form agenda always seemed to bear the imprint of otherness. On the one hand, it was the Departmental position but on the other, it was clearly an exception to a whole series of norms which, if not transparently articulate, were nonetheless widely held. One had the feeling that while the Built-Form ethos was sanctioned, it was never the official policy of the department. Built-Form always seemed to me to bear the taint of underdevelopment, like a child, gifted and expressive but not really able to stand on its own.

When I was at MIT there was simply no countervailing force in design. Admittedly, it was a bad time for countervailing forces. The knee-jerk pieties of modernism misunderstood that were handed out at Harvard were no alternative: indeed, they were all about the absence of any alternatives and by contrast the Built-Form approach seemed almost dazzling in its cogency and vision. But it stood in unexamined isolation: the Department simply didn't provide the kind of alternative, the kind of tension that could lead to refinement, that could give both students and apostles perspective.

Although my footing in observation is a little shaky, it looks like the situation is more or less the same today. The core of design education at MIT seems still to have the same basic components, the same array of structures and influences.

Whether for educational or economic reasons, MIT - like most other schools - relies on the sporadic presence of visiting designers for its major alternative. While this may be desirable at many levels, it lacks the pressure of more stable alternatives. More, from what I know, the sequence of visiting designers available at MIT seems to be a less than staggeringly charismatic array. To my mind, the forcefulness of such visitors is a paramount attraction. They must be able to offer a cogency of approach that can be made manifest and absorbed within a single term, an approach that's articulate enough to be tested against the datum of earlier experience.

A Visit To MIT

Recently I've paid two visits to the Department, prowled around a bit, talked to a number of faculty and students. I've tried on these two occasions to take something of the semiotic pulse of the place, just to see what inferences I might be able to draw from the way it struck me. My filters for judging this sort of impression are, I think, strong and varied: I went to MIT, I've been around a lot of architectural schools, I've worked as a journalist, a professional purveyor of first impressions. And the impressions I received were not hard to come by. The feel of the school communicates a very visible character.

Most strikingly, perhaps, the school struck me as a place that hadn't changed very much. Familiar faces and relationships were everywhere. The environment was likewise unaltered in any fundamental way. The ethos of the school reproduced itself in the physical environment in a manner consistent with most of my memories of earlier experiences. A walk through the place triggered an array of reactions which were strikingly familiar. This was not, I think, merely the result of my being primed to receive signals I already knew but the result of unaltered emanations from the place itself. The second visit only reinforced the conclusions of the first in this regard.

One's first reaction to a visit to the Department is the specific quality of the space it inhabits. It is, on many levels, profoundly uncongenial. To begin, one immediately notices the weak physical relation of the department vis a vis the spatial interests of the institute. Architecture is only legibly present to a visitor in terms of the larger system of codes by which MIT arrays its components. The space of the department is organized by and dominated by the connective tissue of the institute, especially the drearily big scale of endless corridors and the drearily repetitive institutional lettering on the innumerable but precisely numbered glass-

paned doors. One's initial feeling is that whatever activities take place behind all those doors are somehow ancillary to their position in the larger constellation of institutional ordering. The character of any individual spaces always takes form in terms of a struggle with the spaces which dispose them, a struggle which is seldom decided in favor of the peripheral event.

The Department (and school) is thus present as a series of discrete interludes whose common features emerge as the result of a social rather than a physical compact. Naturally, this is something of an overstatement. There is, in the first place proximity. Things are pretty much near. There are also the particulars of the local cooptation of the common zones. But here it's a bit of a shocker. The Department bulletin board and other appropriations of spine space are surprisingly of a piece with kindred cooptations of other units, just the same sorts of fellowship announcements and bureaucratic business that one finds in the Electrical Engineering Department. Architecture barely ventures forth from behind its closed doors. There is virtually no display, no attempt to demonstrate the physical forms of consensus. Considering architecture's subject matter, this is profoundly surprising.

Behind the closed doors, things are somewhat different. Here too, however, larger structures oppress. The view is largely analogous to that in the corridors. One look out, in the main, at the casement punctured brick backs of the neo-classical wings whose frontal expression is reserved for a different public. It's a dreary view, a view that is inescapably deadening. Surely, the windows of the Department offer what is without question the worst prospect of any major architectural school's. Inside and outside the school's spaces, one is constantly confronted by some version of what can only be described as the enemy.

The spaces respond variously and I don't really mean to dwell of their particulars which are no trick to limn: the library is cramped, jury rooms are inadequately lit, there's a pervasive, charmless crumminess about most zones, the exception being areas of conventionally high prestige, such as the Dean's office. What I'd like to think about for a minute are the studio spaces, MIT architecture's most emblematic construction, the ontogeny recapitulating the phylogeny of Built Form. The studio constructions are the Department's claim to a physical character; they're what visiting students go to see; they're the only artifact available to seek out, stand-ins for Gund Hall or Rudolph's building at Yale.

When I first came to MIT, the mezzanines were powerfully attractive to me. To begin, they had a critical presence. They seemed to exist in some sort of opposition to the anality of the debased modernist practice which I'd recently escaped. They were, in contrast to the standard issue deracinated Corbuisianisms of other places, formally rich and intricate, a warren instead of a grid. Moreover, they seemed to bear the imprint of a kind of social practice. Like the squatter settlements that were fascinating to many of us as symbols of the struggle for an autonomous urbanism, the mezzanines seemed to be the work of participant builders who were shaping their own destinies, at any rate shaping ten or twenty square feet of their own destinies. The inference - looking at these structures - was that they enjoyed not merely the sanction of the Department but somehow embodied its spirit. And I think, at the time, that it may have been true.

Returning to the studios after an absence of close to ten years, my impression had shifted dramatically. The sight of the mezzanines depressed me. Needless to say, the change was in me, not the structures. These appeared almost exactly as I remembered them, the scene of studios I had taken were only minimally modified. But now they seemed to symbolize not possibility but stasis. Their potential was to me eviscerated. Instead of offering that halcyon prospect of

individual possibility they now struck me as structures of oppression, hemming in instead of opening out. I don't want to overwork the metaphorical possibilities of the observation but the mezzanines do strike me as having something in common with the state of the Department. There hasn't been much building on the strength of initial perceptions. And the price of complacency is atrophy.

The situation of the Department finds schematic physical expression in other ways as well. Even in my day there was constant discussion about the lack of social space at the school, at the absence of a common zone of social interaction. Indeed, it was one of the striking aspects of my time at MIT, the absence of the institutions of conviviality and interchange within the Department. From a look around and a few conversations, things seem even worse. At one level, it's almost unbelievable: there's no place to simply sit down and talk, virtually no sign of physical resistance to the atomizing impetus of those decentering corridors. The physical agenda of the whole place is isolation. And this seems terribly wrong.

The sense of isolation is pervasive. Even a brief walk around reveals a Department structured by fiefdom. I seem to remember something called clusters in my day but some impetus

seems to have driven things well beyond that relatively informal proposition. I was amazed at the degree to which sympathetic subgroups seemed to occupy separate spaces around the Department and disheartened at the extent to which (judging by my conversations) there seemed to be not just lack of communication but relatively overt hostility among them. To my eye, the Department showed advanced signs of debilitating bureaucratic disease, a deadly malaise in a creative environment. Nothing could reinforce this impression more than my long personal experience of the astonishing dedication on the part of the Executive Officer and his staff to the hollowest kind of bureaucratic pettiness.

A Reading Of A Departmental Text

Many of the conclusions garnered from a physical perusal of the Departmental space are, for me, born out by a reading of the working paper on the "Future of the Architectural Profession" that has been promulgated with the apparent purpose of defining a position from which decisions about the future of the Department can be assessed. To begin with general impressions, I found this to be a generally depressing document both in its particular expression and in its larger implications. I'd like to conclude this intervention with some discussion of this and several other documents that have

been the result of the current review of curriculum, organization, and ethos at MIT.

To begin, it's obvious that the presence of such documents bears deep implication. Their evocation of a "crisis" in both school and profession is reminiscent of previous crises and is thus of interest both for its special circumstances and its kinship with other incidents in a cyclical pattern. Most strikingly, one is reminded of the crisis that is the grandparent of all such crises, that of the "sixties." Of course, the hallmark of that time was the cry of "relevance." Like the ethic that dominated at modern architecture's origins, the crisis of the sixties was perceived in social terms and the criterion that proponents of its critical thrust (myself certainly among them) sought to introduce was one of justice and compassion. The implications were thoroughgoing, in terms of the structure of architectural practice, the character of education, the nature of architecture's constituency, and finally the visible face of architecture. I say "finally" because the crisis was surely responsible for the reinscription of the role of form in the larger matrix of architecture's activity.

The new crisis, reflected in the current surge of self-analysis, seems likewise to be perceived as social in origins,

but in a far different sense. The central issue now is not, as in the earlier crisis, service but survival. In a sense, this is also a crisis of relevance. But all the touchstones have been replaced. The document proceeds from the premise that architecture is faced with a slackening off of "demand" and that architects must consequently be re-equipped to provide "services" more attuned to the changing requirements of the marketplace. Architects are urged to "diversify" in order to enhance their opportunities and "expand its business horizon."

Reading this report, one is immediately struck by its tone. In structure and language, the study invents a universe of discourse which describes only a single conceptual option. From the first, the "problem" of architecture is seen as business problem, its major difficulties seen in terms of marketing strategies rather than in terms of issues of content. This is quite exceptional and quite exceptionally dismaying. We're passing through a period in which there has been joined a vigorous debate about architectural poetics and expressivity and nowhere does the document even marginally acknowledge this. The whole analysis is suffused with the rhetoric of corporate enterprise. The means of architectural production - computer-aided design, team-playing, management - are emphasized to the nearly complete disregard of

architecture's ends. Nowhere does one read of the creation of humane, poetic, environments. Instead, one is hectored constantly about the need to develop business skills to meet "changing" demand, whatever it might turn out to be.

I find this shocking on a number of levels. First, in that it purports to be a study of the future of the architectural profession and confines its investigation to a single hypothesis.. Second, in its supine willingness to promulgate a position that virtually eliminates the core of architecture as we've historically known it. I don't mean to sound the Luddite trumpet but the technocratization of the profession is clearly not the only alternative with which it's currently confronted. A report on the future of the profession might well couch itself in terms of inventing strategies for the preservation of architecture's historic concerns in the light of increasing pressure for their elimination instead of offering a focus on the dissipation of these ends. Rather than the dispassion of social homogeneity, a report might well support the passions of creation.

As I work through the various documents that I've collected and formulate my reactions to them, I can feel the anxiety rising in myself. I don't want to stray from the bounds of analytic propriety but I have billed these pages as being no

more than my own impressions and I therefore feel bound to be honest about what I'm feeling. At one level, it's deja vu. All this study, all those interviews, all those committees, all that structuring, characterization and recharacterization of the issues seems like something that's been gone through before. It's a ritual. And rituals, as everyone knows, have nothing to do with real investigation or change, rituals have everything to do with stasis. It's all so hermetic, like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. The basic fact seems to be that no amount of rearrangement of the same pieces can result in any serious reform of essential content. All this analysis seems to be about the invention of fesh justifications for doing things more or less precisely as they're being done. The constellations are exactly the same, they're just being looked at from a different part of the sky.

What Is To Be Done?

One of the things I learned when I was at Harvard was the tenacity with which mediocrity has a self-interest in its own reproduction. Things only began to change at that school when a wholesale purge was set in motion. MIT's problem seems somewhat different although there's a similarly threatening core of ossification. The operation of self-preservation at MIT is a more dynamic one, substituting endless analysis for

simple immobility. And yet it seems to be clear that the department is crying for serious change. Nothing bears more conspicuous witness than the voluminous self-analysis represented in the welter of recent documents about what is to be done. The question is whether this kind of institutionalized self-analysis is to be a substitute for dramatic action, whether - as in so many bureaucratic situations - the instrument is to be a substitute for the result.

While it's hardly my place to prescribe remedies for the legion difficulties that the various departmental surveys and reports have pointed up, I'd still like to venture a few impressions. As these reports (and the report of the NAAB) point up, the Department of Architecture is in a serious bind. The physical and curricular dimensions of that bind need no further elaboration. However, it must be said that whatever difficulties the Department faces, they are strongly exacerbated by the fact that any change must come into conflict with the idea of an "MIT Position" that is held central to the character of the Department. This "position" is the object of no little reverence and fealty. But to my eye, the MIT Position has come increasingly to resemble the emperor's new clothes. It's become so vague as to be nearly invisible. More, although one gets the sense of holy writ, it

turns out to be a religion that lacks any codification of its sacred texts. One is assured of its importance but nobody seems able to say what the hell it is beyond a restricted number of overworked pieties: it's social, it's complex, it's responsive, it's collage, it opposes the poison of style. Mainly, however, it's hidden. It shirks the tests of analysis and exposure.

It is in this sense that all the discussion I've encountered misses the real point entirely. By confining itself to a list of the Department's many deficiencies, it fails to engage the issue of its strengths. This, it seems to me, should be the focus of debate. The department should vigorously and uninhibitedly discuss just what it is that's singular about the MIT approach to architecture. Only in the light of a refined view of this central issue can deficiencies be truly assessed. Yet I fear this may be impossible. So fragmented do things appear to have become, the prospects for practical consensus seem dim. Perhaps this means resignation to a pluralist model, perhaps a direct assault on specific components of the school. In any event, lines clearly drawn cannot help but profit the department in the long run.

Jefferson had a phrase about democracy requiring periodic fertilization with the blood of patriots to keep its health.

A bloodbath may not be the answer at MIT but I think that a dramatic exposure of tensions certainly is crucial. I cannot stress sufficiently the sense I had - on visiting the Department - that things are very tense indeed at the level of values. Reading between the lines of the numerous departmental documents only lends confirmation to this view. I do not think that MIT's "problem" is one that can be solved by internal restructuring, by realigning familiar components. Clearly, some dynamic element must be introduced. This might be through the importation of a strong person on a horse - though recent shifts in leadership do not seem to bode especially well for that approach. Equally, it might come through the arrival of independent and strong minded faculty who are not obliged to the institutional pieties of the place. Certainly it must come from an opening of the department to the larger architectural community, from an end to the period of chronic isolation that MIT has enjoyed, even insisted on, for so many years. There's no question at all in my mind that a new wind needs to blow down those corridors if MIT is to regain the stature and passion it should have.

Envoi

I've been asked to append a few specific suggestions about courses of action that strike me as relevant or desirable.

Basically, I have only one. MIT seems to be in the process of becoming an architectural school that teaches everything but design. There's a handsomely endowed Islamic Studies Center. A new Real Estate Institute has arrived. A fortune is being spent on a Media Center which is recruiting like mad and which is about to move into a luxurious new building designed by a big-time corporate architect. Departmental reports rail about the coming computer culture as the Institute wires itself up to invent the millennium. Meanwhile, back in the studios, the same little complexes in timber continue to be drawn.

There's something absolutely crazy here. Resources are poured into everything but the central fact of architectural education: the practical study of the design of the built environment. What can I specifically recommend? That the Media building be expropriated immediately for the use of the design studios? That fifteen energetic design instructors immediately be added to the payroll? That new Dean be sacked in favor of a powerful person of known and widely expressed design sympathies. Would it be entirely out of place for a great architect to head the school? Would it be out of place for large numbers of impassioned designers to offer instruction whenever they can be had? None of this would be unreasonable: the question is simply whether it would be possible. If my observations of current trends are correct,

MIT seems to be in the process of designing itself out of the teaching and cultivation of architecture. The trend must be reversed.