

DESIGN IN TUITION

by Schalk le Roux

Can design be something that we can do? The first year student asked. Can we share it with others? Can we learn to design?

Can you teach it to others?

The answers of the teacher are uncertain, vague, incomplete and questioning. It is possible to learn – on condition we are prepared to listen to that which we hear around us and are prepared to become responsible by becoming human. Maybe it will be possible if we can reflect upon our actions in the context of that which is our legacy? Over and above the vocabulary of philosophers we must learn the words with which philosophers without philosophy philosophise and those ordinary words with which architecture without architects is made.

Architecture and design are specialised disciplines, but should not be isolated to the world of the specialist. Creativity is not restricted to science, to art, to literature, but is in every aspect of life.¹ Naturally these disciplines have their own vocabularies – but the exclusive system of the modernist with its private language, is to be distrusted.

First year is about the discovery of the self – the imaginations, dreams, visions and personal myths of every student – and the teacher will search for differences and diversity and will stand guard against the accepted theoretical, the credited functional, the trusted routine, the assumed rational, the addictive conduct.

And how is learning to be achieved? By dialogue and confrontation, confrontation with as wide a variety of architectures, as wide a variety of texts, as wide a variety of contexts, as wide a variety of scales, as wide a variety of approaches as is possible. Architecture is learned and taught through discourse. Teachers search for new confrontations, of which they do not know the answers through repetition – especially of earlier successful investigations. They are aware of the refutability of any response and the chasm between word and image.

Architects, painters, poets often follow instinctive and vague suspicions and function on the level of disorder in relation to perception, questioning, insecurity, fear, tension, and chance – on the level which cannot be formulated consciously, because consciousness needs to be suspended to arrive at a decision.² The focus does not lie in the securing or conserving of meaning, but in the (continuous) laying bare of meaning. Technique or technical know-how of the discipline is naturally indispensable but it must step back in this process to make room for the event or chain of events.³

Is design creation, invention or discovery?⁴ How will the teacher know? How can doubt, distrust, insecurity, imprecision, randomness, ambiguity, chance and fiction be taught? Design decisions have indefinite and multivalent meaning. Created structures have many voices and need diffused attention and thought processes, the type of attention that disputes the normal, rational thought habits. It creates doubt and breeds chaos, but does not preclude arrival at a good and happy solution that may even look logical in the rear-view mirror.

This is unfortunately not what most educators want to hear. They want a consistent and regulated system of logical test with expected outcome. Everything must be measured; everything must be scientifically provable and academically founded. Like a building one is supposed to start at the foundation and end with the ridge tiles. They want to move away from the important part of living their experiences where an opening for the eventful can be created – for the fortunate happenstance, for the arrival of the extraordinary.³

If we are always needing answers, we might well ask: Why do we need architects and designers? The good teacher has an aversion to the correct answer because it terminates further thought. And true students have few problems in not always having an absolute, irrevocable answer to every problem or to be able to change their minds about them.⁵ The questions to ask are: Is it necessary to answer someone else's questions? What is worthwhile knowing? Are there enough ques-



→ 1. René Magritte. *The Betrayal of Images*. 1929. Oil on canvas, 62.2 x 81 cm. René Magritte had a zeal for exactitude and was concerned about the "tyranny of words". For him the image is not to be confused with the object. Calvocoressi¹¹, plate 30.

tions for all the answers we already have? And here one can ponder the verdict of quantum physicist, David Bohm: that is that all knowledge is language, and language science, and science art.⁶ The only thing to learn is how to learn.

Teaching is always in a state of becoming appropriate, and the ideal to design a pertinent design education is only in the interests of the masters of the moment. That we can teach design is based on the assumption that we know truths and that we can perpetuate these. Architecture is learned, taught and tested through confrontation, discussion of ideas, thoughts, rootless conjecture, long periods of fruitless searching, sudden insights, many failures and great successes.

Teachers are there to create problems and not to give answers. They will try not to ask questions to which they already know the answers. They will rarely tell students what they think they should know and if there are any lessons to be taught, they will develop from the response of students and not from previously determined logical structures. We know that we do not get meaning from things, but that we assign meaning⁵ and we know that meaning is always postponed,⁷ left for later and never entirely grasped.

Design is also taught through criticism, another form of confrontation. Language is used to this end and the meaning we give to words and images (and not the meaning of words and images) is again important. Words can sometimes be unexpectedly effective because we make new moves in old games, weave them together in unforeseen sentences or use them to invent new games in their entirety.⁸

This is true for both the literal and visual languages we speak. And of course, we can and need to learn to teach language. Not only the spoken but also the visual language that is needed to confront the self, to put together, to pull apart, to talk to one self and to others, to become critical. Drawing and drafting needs continuous and rigorous attention – again allowing personal accents in pronunciation.

Criticism does not claim authority or control of the work; it runs parallel to it and creates tension between image and word. It is a creative activity that oversteps the borders of preconception.⁹ It makes use of language and respects the intelligence rather than the meaning of words. To be able to criticise we must listen – especially to the first year student who may be able to help us to re-mythologise our thought processes to such an extent that we will be able to teach with conviction. Teachers of design confront, then listen, then learn, then teach – both practical and useless knowledge, because teaching requires no method, but rather a will to understanding.

To be a student means to re-enact actions and to re-create creations. Through this process the real achievements of the past come into being, through these actions meaning come into being through literally realising the thoughts and concepts we live with.¹⁰

Good teachers will make many mistakes in trying to teach design. Maybe that is the only reason why they should be trusted with the subject. ☺

Schalk le Roux is a Professor in the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria.

schalk.leroux@up.ac.za



→ 2. Paul Klee. *Highways and Byways*. 1929. Oil on linen, 83.7 x 93.5cm.

Dialogue with nature remained a fundamental condition for Klee as did the relationship between painter and painting. The painting's looks at us, he said in a lecture in 1924. Naubert-Riser¹², plate 93.

Notes

This article is a shortened version of a lecture given in 2005 at the University of Pretoria. It was inspired by the writings of Timo Smuts, who was senior lecturer in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Stellenbosch until his death last year. I would also like to thank Roger Fisher for translating the material.

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