THE UNTHINKABLE DOCTORATE

COLLOQUIUM N E T H C A
[Network for theory, history and criticism of architecture]

AT

SINT- LUCAS SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
BRUSSELS – BELGIUM

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THE UNTHINKABLE DOCTORATE

This colloquium is intended to unite academics and practitioners around the question of the doctorate in architecture, and particularly the more specific question of what might be a doctorate for architects who practice.

The question may be formulated in at least two parts:

1. Under what conditions might the design work of an architect, formalized and formatted by him- or herself, be recognized as a doctorate?
2. How might doctoral work be configured so as to help ground and further the architectural work of the author?

Doctorates in the "architectural sciences" (considered in their most general sense, including urbanism, urban design, and regional planning), in the various domains of construction, and in theory and history of architecture are currently recognized.

But a "doctorate in architecture" which is constituted from the architect's work itself – the verb "to architecture" is as yet lacking from our vocabulary – has not yet really been explored. What is its field of application? What criteria are applicable to it? What options might be available, and what should be required of potential candidates?

A certain number of colloquia and conferences have recently taken place: Ohio 1999 (Doctorates in Design Conference); La Clusaz 2000 (Foundations for the Future: Doctoral Education in Design Conference); Delft 2000 (Research by Design Conference); Montreal 2002 (Conference on Design Theory and Methodology); Stockholm – Helsinki 2003 (Four Faces: The Dynamics of Architectural Knowledge); Tokyo 2003 (Asian Design Conference – Doctoral Education in Design); Marseille 2004 (La Question Doctorale); Delft 2004 (Conference on Research and Design).

THE AIM OF THIS COLLOQUIUM

Even though institutions often speak of the 'advancement of knowledge,' the de facto requirement is that a doctorate should contribute to the 'advancement of science' (perhaps in the same way that one might distinguish between 'spirituality', on the one hand, and 'religion' on the other).

The distinction – although it does not and should not represent a value judgement – is rarely made. Nevertheless, nearly anyone should accept the idea that 'knowledge' is a broader and more open category than 'science'. It is in the hope of taking advantage of this broader conception, this unacknowledged potential, that we have decided to organize this colloquium.
THE CURRENT LACK.

Most doctorates in architecture are developed within the so-called architectural sciences, that is in history and historiography, theory, monographs on architects, or further into other sciences "of architecture", where architecture becomes the object of investigation. Even when this work is done by researchers who are themselves trained as architects, it is rare that they maintain their status as practitioners.

All of this doctoral work is useful, but there are very few that:
- produce a specifically architectural reasoning, from within architecture rather than from its numerous neighbour disciplines,
- furnish tools or constituent elements of a contemporary, historically-situated architecture.

There is little choice but to consider that many of these doctorates will run the risk of 'advancing' a 'science' without any clear mandate, a blind encyclopaedic enterprise whose only purpose is the accumulation of undifferentiated information. One might then worry that too much of current doctoral work helps to advance this orphaned, deracinated science, without stimulating any progress in terms of knowledge. In other words, this type of work seeks to know about architecture as a product without knowing architecture in its structures and determinations.

Even rarer are those doctorates that think through and reflect upon, by whatever graphic or linguistic means, architecture qua architecture in its various fields of operation, its possible essence or existence.

It is important to consider that the specific rigor of knowledge produced within and for a given discipline – 'discipline' here including both specific practices and the knowledge that inhabits them – is not necessarily the same as that obtaining in the case of strictly scientific knowledge.

It seemed to us that it would be useful to clarify, on one hand, the status of the work performed by architects (more 'knowledge' than 'knowing about', rather discipline than science, but without excluding the latter); and, on the other, to begin to make it more credible that the discipline as a whole should satisfy the primary requirement of the university: advancement of knowledge rather than service to the balkanized sciences.

ARCHITECTS, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE UNTHINKABLE

Is it not precisely those architects who insist on making a contribution to their discipline, through their architectural work, through a constant prospective activity in the field of "architecting", who might achieve the thinking of architecture as architecture, as what one might term a sector of knowledge? It is surely the case, and yet the academic world has found it difficult to name or to conceptualize this work in such a way as to obtain institutional recognition. The historically recent deification of science has left it in epistemological blinkers.

For practicing architects who maintain a constant research in their work, the following distinctions are clear (even if they remain unnamed): between science and discipline, or between 'knowledge' and 'knowing about'. They consider that architecture and 'architecting' constitutes a discipline, like philosophy or art, in that it is looking for a certain truth concerning the structure of the real which is not yet constructed – and thus is not inherently a science which would aim rather for knowledge of a demonstrable reality. Architecture, for them, is thus a sector of knowledge and not the concretization of accumulated erudition. Such architects do not consider their work as scientific, even if architecture is accompanied by sciences and technologies that are driven by or attached to the discipline.
But what is this 'looking for a certain truth concerning the structure of the real which is not yet constructed'? Is it a way of 'thinking architecture', or simply unthinkable?

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The problem, of course, has as much to do with institutions as with architects. How might the former come to recognize non- or partially scientific work as a possible avenue for the doctorate? Is it not a question of the same order as our non-exclusive distinction between disciplinary knowledge and narrowly scientific 'knowing about'?

Should one not then demand that a proper doctorate in architecture should advance thinking in matters having to do with the comprehension of architectural order, ethics, structure?

Is such a doctorate unthinkable at present?

Will the prestige and influence of institutions continue only to accrue to those disciplines that can be called 'sciences'? Will they continue to avoid the question of broader standards of recognition beyond those narrowly qualified as 'scientific'?

Such are the questions that participants in the colloquium, whether practitioners or scholars, will be invited to try to answer, based on their own institutional or professional experience. We hope in particular that some practitioners will be able to show how a veritable doctorate in architecture can aid the development of their design work or of their thinking. If a doctorate in architecture could include:

1. a communicable formatting of architectural work proper,
2. and the precise and integral discursive construction of the theory of the work by its author, might this not allow a better way of "thinking through architecture", both for the author and for her intellectual community?

Our intention is that the colloquium should become a locus of cultural production. Participants are invited to make propositions toward understanding the situation and, as importantly, correcting it. They will help to provide a rigorous analysis of the problem, together with ambitious suggestions for solving it, and examples of promising strategies already in place. The colloquium will end in the production of a collective document which will relay its most important findings and proposals – not just minutes or proceedings, but strongly-stated and broadly-shared propositions. It is our hope that such a document will help to initiate a serious effort on the part of institutions, polities and professional groups to allow our discipline the full measure of its potential for the advancement of knowledge.