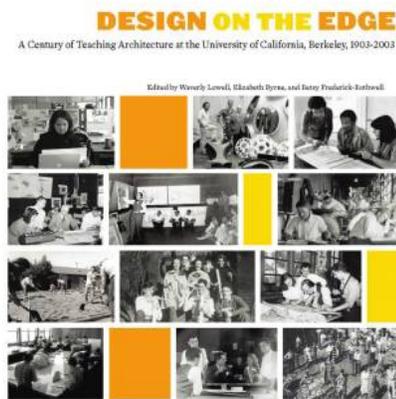ANTHONY RAYNSFORD

Constructing The Edge

Architecture in a Turbulent Age

Book Review: *Design on the Edge, A Century of Teaching Architecture at the University of California Berkeley*, edited by Waverly Lowell, Elizabeth Byrne, and Betsy Frederick-Rothwell, College of Environmental Design, Berkeley, 2009.

In the late 1960s, U.C. Berkeley's College of Environmental Design lay at the crossroads of two temporarily aligned forces: leftist radicalism and empirical social science. Some professors became, for a time, 'participant-observers' in a form of grassroots design process that precluded, indeed disdained, conventional architectural practice. Thus, in *Design on the Edge* Professor of Architecture Sym Van der Ryn recalls the famous People's Park experiment, an impromptu occupation and landscaping of a vacant university-owned lot: "I brought my students to the site to watch like a group of anthropologists. (And, I admit, to goad folks on.) As a young maverick professor from the university, I was inadvertently named arbiter." (p. 152)

This is but one of dozens of recollections recounted in this sprawling, centennial biography of architectural education at U.C. Berkeley. Part documentary history and part collective memoir, *Design on the Edge* ranges from 1894, when Bernard Maybeck taught the first courses there in descriptive geometry, to the early 1990s, when the Department of Architecture had assumed something close to its present form. With its 76 separate essays and historical documents, the book presents the reader with a kaleidoscopic array of narratives and sub-narratives, loosely ordered by chronology or theme. However, the bulk of the writing focuses on the critical quarter century from the 1950s—when architect William Wurster replaced the Beaux Arts curriculum with a modified Bauhaus approach and founded the present College of Environmental Design—to the 1970s, when the curriculum was re-vamped to accommodate the turbulent political and disciplinary shifts of the previous decade.

This also seems to have been the period when the Berkeley architectural curriculum was most "on the edge," as the title suggests, of innovative approaches,

Mendelsohn and students: Well-known European Modernist Erich Mendelsohn, pictured here with his students, taught at UC Berkeley from 1948–1953. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF GEORGE KOSTRITSKY.

interdisciplinary experimentation, and ideological debate. Many of the themes of this critical period will seem familiar to contemporary architectural education: the emphasis on "ecology"; the search for innovative technologies to solve social and environmental problems; and the belief in interdisciplinary approaches to architectural knowledge. For the historian sifting through the material in this book, one question becomes: whatever happened to these earlier iterations, and what lessons have been forgotten?

The stage for modern architectural education at Berkeley seems to have been set by the vision that William Wurster and his wife, Catherine Bauer Wurster, constructed for the future College of Environmental Design. Some of this background is nicely summarized by former dean Roger Montgomery's posthumous essay, "Architecture on the (Cutting) Edge." Having arrived at Berkeley from MIT, Wurster brought with him a modernist belief in the efficacy of scientific knowledge in solving architectural problems, leading him "to appoint non-architects to his faculty and through them to establish sub-units with links to accrediting, evaluation, and most importantly, to the international community of scholars in that particular subfield or discipline, rather than architecture as such." (p. 109)

Internationally famous housing advocate Catherine Bauer Wurster, who came out of urban planning just at the moment when that profession was seeing itself as a version of applied social science, seems to have been particularly interested in bringing sociologists into the architecture program. Reading between the lines of the various essays that follow, one has a sense that the belief that scientific expertise could lead to a better built environment (meaning, variously, more cost-effective, healthier, more humane, more socially equitable) ran headlong into the problems of conflicting aesthetic, cultural, and political values. Cultural and urban geographer Clare Cooper Marcus, who taught within "Area E" or "Social Factors," describes, somewhat bitterly, the rise and decline of this area as studio faculty members systematically failed to assimilate social scientific expertise and research into their studio assignments. Social scientists seem to have been exasperated that architects made what they deemed fantastic and unproven claims concerning the effects of their buildings on users, while design methodologists on the faculty cast doubt on the translatability of raw scientific data into design; in part, by pointing out that many of the decisions were inherently political ones, with potential winners and losers.

During the political unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s, faculty became increasingly ambivalent towards both technology and academic theory. On the one side, social scientists and socially concerned architects increasingly saw themselves as advocates for overlooked minority groups and the poor, and often employed scientific knowledge toward specific advocacy goals while becoming suspicious of (other) architectural theory. Revealing such activist ideals, Clare Marcus reproduces a departmental document that she co-authored in 1976 entitled the "Habitat Manifesto," which concludes with the following emphatic denunciation: "The world's problems are not going to stand idle while we theorize!" (p. 143)

Some professors attempted to escape "the system" in its various forms of alienation—the formal classroom, the construction industry, the architectural profession—and, in the process, rejected the technocratic and scientific assumptions of their colleagues. This was the path followed by Sim Van der Ryn after the People's Park episode, which ended in a violent retaking of the university land. In 1971, he ran an experimental studio in which students collectively designed, constructed and lived in their own village, using found materials and recycled chicken coops, thus producing a studio equivalent of People's Park in the semi-Arcadian rural space of Marin County.

Buckminster Fuller with faculty and students: Buckminster Fuller, pictured here (center), collaborated with UC Berkeley students and faculty on his "Fly's Eye" project.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PROF. EMERITUS CLAUDE STOLLER.

At other times, this escape involved theorizing a return to an imagined pre-technocratic, in fact pre-Enlightenment, wholeness. This type of reaction, and the sharp critique it received from empirically minded colleagues, is illustrated in the exchange between architect Jean-Pierre Protzen, known today as a leading expert in Incan architecture, and Christopher Alexander, whose treatises have inspired a broad, popular following of non-architects who are alienated by architectural modernism. Protzen's scathing review of Christopher Alexander et al's 1977 book, *A Pattern Language*, reproduced together with Alexander's response, exposes a fissure between scientific detachment and neoromantic calls for healing the rifts of modernity.

Protzen accuses *A Pattern Language* of being prescriptively rigid, essentially of being a pattern book, and methodologically unscientific, having no grounding in anything other than Alexander's own cultural and subjective preferences. Alexander's response is a critique of both scientific objectivity and cultural relativism. Sounding very much like a latter day Victorian critic of industrial modernity, Alexander intones: "In the great medieval period of Christian art and in the great period of Islamic art, the artists were able to express such immense feeling because they worked day after day, modifying what they did . . . able to come closer and closer to 'the One' . . ." (p. 177). From an empirical, scientific point of view, such statements amounted to nothing

Students collectively designed, constructed and lived in their own village, using found materials and recycled chicken coops.

less than mysticism, veiling the cultural distinctions, material conditions, and political disagreements among actual users, designers and clients.

It is clear from such exchanges that the immense quantity of interdisciplinary work produced at the College of Environmental Design never led to any identifiable "Berkeley School" but rather to a fascinating set of opposing responses to the economic, political, and technological complexities of architectural practice. While the book as a diverse compilation of discourses makes no unified argument concerning the main episodes, legacies, or failures of the various Berkeley experiments, several moments seem to stand out. First, in the critical period of the late 1960s, there seems to have been an irreconcilable contradiction between the deeply anti-authoritarian, anti-professional ethos of the Counterculture and the ever more highly specialized expertise and methods developed by the various architectural researchers. Second, the reaction against modernism in the 1960s and 70s seems to have taken two opposing directions: towards an advocacy-based immersion in the social scientific study of various users and the development of an anti-modernist (including post-modernist), increasingly formalist design methodology.

Finally, the failure, implied in the book, of Berkeley's utopian attempt to combine social science with social concern avoids what certainly seems to be at the political and economic center of this failure: namely, that the sophisticated research methods developed at Berkeley added yet another layer to the professional cost of architecture, a cost more likely today to be wielded by international corporations than by under-served community groups. A history has yet to be written on the legacy of the Berkeley experiments in the context of global, and increasingly corporate capitalism. **B**