

Louis Kahn's pedagogy

Worldly appearance in *Second Life*

Learning in Kahn's shadow

I read James Williamson's paper (arq 17.3–4, pp. 313–24) with relish, not least because I have long held a fascination with Kahn's work, but also because his is arguably one of the most celebrated examples in architecture of the master teacher model.

Kahn was rooted in the *Beaux-Arts* tradition inherited from Paul Philippe Cret, himself a student of the *Ecoles* in both Lyon and Paris. This tradition, advocated in America by Richard Morris Hunt, espoused an educational philosophy that had emerged in the eighteenth century from the notion of articulated pupillage, and from which was developed the system of atelier 'patrons'. As Dana Cuff observes, these were typically established architects whose practices were located elsewhere, and it is in this role that Kahn was cast.

To this day, vestiges of the *Beaux-Arts* ethos remain in architecture education and a scratching of the surface in most schools will reveal some remnant of this legacy. Even the seemingly most liberal or experimental pursuits can mask pedagogic or behavioural practices that in educational terms are outmoded, even regressive. As an educator in architecture, I have progressively found this historic representation of learning to be problematic. There may be those who have adopted the traditional master model and who have been exemplary and inspirational mentors, but exceptions rarely make the case for the generality.

Ultimately, the debate revolves around questions of educational philosophy, and it is thinking in this sphere that represents the most dramatic paradigm shift between the days of Kahn's teaching, and current pedagogic

attitudes and values. It is interesting to consider the sea changes that have taken place in educational thinking over the last fifty years, a period that has witnessed a progressive movement from a dominant tutor-centric to a student-centric ideology. While this shift has placed a general emphasis on developing learner cultures that foster independence, many of the pedagogies adopted in institutions remain unchanged from the days of didactically oriented, more privileged and selective university education. Many believe that studio-based teaching is inherently student-centric, but that too is an assumption that has increasingly been challenged in the literature, and with good reason. As Kaare Skagen has shown, the atelier model has historically been adopted extensively within vocational pedagogy, although its defining characteristic of power asymmetry has latterly come under widespread scrutiny and

criticism among architecture educators. Fundamentally, due to the influence of power, it is not a model of true dialogue, instead relying on the 'tacit knowledge' acquired through observation of the 'master'. This is clearly played out in the anecdotes of Kahn's protégés, where monologue appears to dominate, and learning, one assumes, is substantially observational.

We live in a time where it is expected that learning processes are explicit, allowing students to determine a direction and a pace for themselves. By contrast, Kahn's Master's class was wholly dependent on his holding court, on whatever matter he saw as being of importance. In other words there was a level of control that constrained the student, despite the degree of challenge in the questions posed. Fundamentally, the recollections presented by Williamson speak of a predominantly passive learning process in which patron or master



1 'One shouldn't judge in a school of architecture. One should criticise, but not judge,' Louis I. Kahn

played a dominant role. However, Kahn was a famously enigmatic, oblique, and somewhat contrary figure and, given the nature of his rhetoric, it is perhaps unsurprising that his teaching practices appear to contain some paradoxes. Schön and Argyris spoke of the mastery/mystery relationship, where the master develops a mystique to create distance from the student, and where mystery is assumed to be a symptom of mastery. Despite there being an undoubted mystique around Kahn, in contrast to some of the critique of the 'masterclass' construct, the reflections of contributors to Williamson's paper speak of an intent that, despite the issue of passivity, paradoxically aligns with some contemporary pedagogic values. The development of critical thinking, engagement with open-ended enquiry, and scepticism, through, in Kahn's case, the tool of the Socratic method, are all examples of this. Similarly, the adoption of Talmudic methods appears to have been intended to stimulate new perspectives and ways of thinking, a methodology he clearly applied to himself, not least in his often elliptical writing. In the form of his words, an extension of his teaching, there is a great seduction that arguably lies in their essence rather than their precision. A point where contemporary educational thinking departs from that of the master model is around the notion of the teacher as the keeper of knowledge, as one to be imitated or emulated, as the director of learning. One senses from Kahn that he questioned this convention, preferring instead to focus on the development of the individual thinker through his perpetual quest to define the essential. Through his interest in beginnings and the fundamental, he inculcated a process of enquiry and challenge that questioned assumptions, and the status quo. Kahn also spoke of a reciprocity in teaching; that there is a mutual benefit arising from the tutor-student relationship, something that is strongly supported by this approach, and by the recollections of his students.

I wonder how Kahn would fare in a world in which prevailing cultural values have experienced such fundamental change, where education is portrayed as a commodity at the behest of market forces, and where the 'market' is as much about the student as 'consumer', as the profession. This would be anathema to Kahn,

I suspect, but it is also a world whose demands increasingly call for educational mastery. In today's education system, the distinction between the profession, seemingly in Kahn's eyes a compromised entity corrupted by commercial forces, and the 'realm of architecture', is increasingly abstract in concept. For many, to even debate such a distinction is a luxury, but in the privileged environment of the University of Pennsylvania, such a discussion is perhaps more easily indulged.

Williamson's account is fascinating, not least because it prompts so many questions about the way in which architecture is taught. Mastery is undeniably important, among architects and among educators. Rarely, however, does such a duality exist in the same person, and indeed there is very little reason to presume that it would. Perhaps with Kahn, it did. Yet, more generally it is troubling that the atelier origins of studio have instilled a seemingly universal tacit belief that good architects inevitably make good educators and, implicit within this, that the skill set associated with a practising architect is somehow equivalent to a skilled pedagogue. How vociferous would our rebuttal be to anyone claiming the converse?

Kahn remains an enigmatic and quixotic figure, and through their paradoxical nature, I harbour a lingering doubt about the extent to which his teaching practices were truly radical. Instead, do they give the impression of being so as a consequence of his idiosyncratic

nature, and our fascination with him as a character? Without doubt he was a brilliant architect, one with whom I have personally held a deep fascination since a student. No doubt learning in his shadow was memorable (the anecdotes in the paper clearly demonstrate that it was), and his ruminations frequently brilliant. Yet, reading the fond accounts of his students, it all seems rather antiquated, far removed from today's reality, and in pedagogic terms I am somewhat thankful for that. Nevertheless, part of me would like to have shared the experience.

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Learning from architecture pedagogy

The idea of one of the 'greatest architects of the second half of the twentieth century' also being one of the greatest teachers of architecture is worth exploring. Discussion of architecture teaching is not often associated with 'great' architects. Indeed, it is often said that being a 'good' designer does not necessarily make a good teacher; that in fact it can usually be taken as a likely indicator of an inability to teach, despite many examples that suggest otherwise. Furthermore, Kahn's teaching career, as discussed by



2 Kahn's Master's Class meeting in Frank Furness's Fine Arts Library, Penn campus

James Williamson (*arq* 17.3–4, pp. 313–24), was considered to be a highly significant influence upon generations of university teachers of architecture; he contributed to the foundation of a pedagogy of architecture that endures.

The paper thus opens out the perennial discussion of a dissonance between academia and practice. That it is ‘common knowledge’ that many practitioners bemoan the relevance to practice of what is taught in architecture schools is turned on its head by Kahn who distinguished between architecture as a discipline and architecture as profession, as a service and as business, suggesting that the ‘mere’ business of architecture is insufficiently disciplinary.

This raises the question as to the ‘proper’ relationship between architecture as a discipline and application in practice. Much criticism from practitioners amounts to a kind of resentment at the way that much ‘routine’ professional practice seems to be categorised as ‘building’ as opposed to ‘architecture’, and that teaching takes a privileged position in emphasising architecture over business, propositional speculation over provision of a service. Kahn’s practice as both teacher and practitioner is here characterised as a proposition for architecture, whatever it takes, including personal sacrifice.

What is often overlooked is the extent to which architecture education provides a bridge between practice and the continuation of speculative enquiry for the beginning practitioner engaged as a visiting lecturer, the unrealised potential for collaborative research through a community of practice. And, moreover, many involved in architecture education have realised the rich reciprocal learning that takes place between teacher and student, among and between cohorts of students, and not least between teachers (where budgets still allow for team teaching).

Currently this productive dialogue between education and practice is being developed further through live projects and the project office that employs practitioner/teachers and students, some long established such as Rural Studio and the Welsh School of Architecture, others more recently founded or reconstituted. Live projects are seen as providing the opportunity for students

and staff to explore practice in a controlled environment where critical judgement can be questioned and scrutinised by engaging students in debate about the similarities and differences between values of pedagogy, research and those of clients and of business.

Architecture education continues to benefit from the mutuality, conviviality and collegiality provided by a supportive and critically challenging study environment, especially given that the ritualistic legitimisation procedures hinted at in Williamson’s text – egotistical behaviour, favouritism, inscrutable mystique, all-night working, brutal and blunt crits of student work – are almost universally seen as anachronistic.

The paper describes a teaching practice that literally ‘en-couraged’ these Master’s students, instilling the courage and confidence to question the values inherited from their schooling in architecture prior to joining Kahn’s class. However, while this was essentially an advanced elite class that reproduced patriarchy both in its model of the master class, and in the actual participation rates of women, albeit presumably reflecting their representation in the profession generally at the time, nevertheless, there was also common ground with later ultra-liberal art school education, such as at Leeds College of Art in the sixties before it was absorbed into the polytechnic system, which for a short time espoused the ethos that all students would pass provided they attended and engaged.

Kahn advocated the notion of ‘building on the ruins [...] A good building makes good ruins.’ His own realised projects demonstrate the tenet that buildings should last well beyond their time, and hence that their programmes should be as generic as possible, facilitating survival as complex allegories into a long distant future present. This is a particularly powerful antidote to the instant gratification and built-in obsolescence of consumerism. Architecture pedagogy likewise continues to promote resistance to the equation of time only with monetary value. This has been widely criticised for failing to inculcate an appropriate business sense in graduates, and reproducing a profession that is unable to promote the actual value of architecture because within the current measure of

high net worth professionals the majority of architects are seen to undervalue themselves.

That this resistance endures in an era subject to the mantra of ‘employability’ (for the ‘masses’) currently prevalent in higher education is remarkable. Student architects are expected to immerse themselves in the critical practice, culture and discipline of architecture far beyond any idea of employability. Indeed, it is for their contribution to the transformation of practice that architecture graduates are truly appreciated by those practitioners who value architecture. Kahn’s contribution to this: ‘a method of thinking that led to constantly questioning what it was that was being considered’, is fundamental.

A current pilot of a new survey in the UK of student engagement to replace the National Student Satisfaction Survey includes questions on ‘higher order learning’, ‘course challenge’, ‘collaborative learning’, ‘reflective and integrative learning’, ‘critical and analytical thinking’, and ‘engagement with research’. It seems that higher education in the UK may be learning something from architecture pedagogy.

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Your article, Aikaterini

Dear Aikaterini Antonopoulou, Thank you for your article [‘Connecting to the (virtual) ground: between groundedness and groundlessness in *Second Life*’, *arq* 17.3–4, pp. 303–11] and the other one I found too, googling your name: ‘From Digital Creations of Space to Analogous Experiences of Places: Living in *Second Life* versus Acting in Flash Mob’. They form a good pair, this article focusing at *on the Earth and under the Sky* while ‘Flash Mob’, in the vein of Heidegger’s fourfold, extends your argument nicely into ‘among the Mortals’. How to think ‘awaiting the Divinities’? But I am already ahead of myself.

Second Life holds me in fascination too. It is somehow tied up with a beloved Virgil, who has all-too-little time for such things. My guide sometimes consents to control my screen

and take me there – but my hands twitch, longing to shift my own vision, and so create the Chiasma. Too easy to enter and have nothing happen at all – since I haven't (yet) made an avatar which satisfactorily houses me, haven't fine-tuned either my own virtual gestures or my navigatory instincts, haven't mastered movement of any kind. I am only slowly accumulating a set of favourite haunts. My eyes, though, my eyes are fully alive. And it's not merely visual.

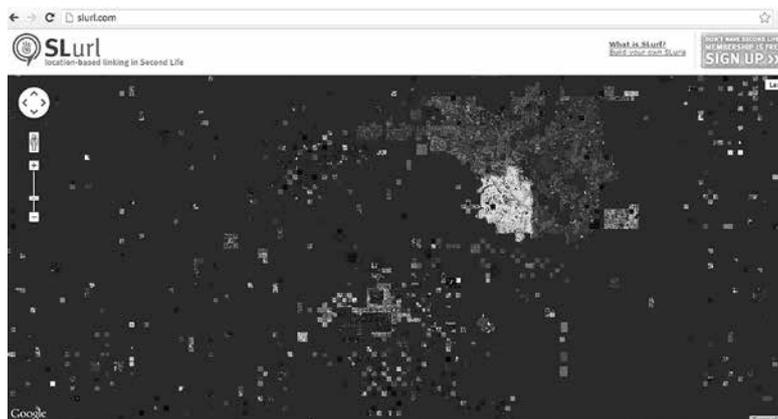
Your premise is that the phenomena that accumulate around and within this space of leisure and play are equal to the task of allowing us to consider our dwelling in an electrated age, at a level that allows us to renew our conversation with philosophers who never foresaw this possibility. I agree. So does Greg Ulmer. I imagine you already know his work, but if not, run to read the latest book; his reflections on 'Flash Reason' provide a Serresian 'Northwest Passage' between avatar and Flash Mob, between a new/old manner of phronetic reasoning and community action.

One of the things I like best about your essay is the way that you use concrete examples: the specificity of the ability to fly (along with the encoding of computational gravity into falling); Skybox floating islands (with and without earthen entrails); and the economic and legal consequences which belie the suggestion that this is all 'not real'.

Practice leads theory, in your article, at least after you start us off with an elegant review of Heidegger's dwelling in the fourfold. Your examples provoke questions rather than statements, questions which ask us to update our interpretations of dwelling and place. Following your lead I offer a few more examples from the production of phenomena in *Second Life*.

Dwelling in our bodies: gesture

Why do my hands flex as I encounter avatars and I am navigated through environments? My genius knows the *topoi* – and takes me to places with extraordinary texture and gesture. It has been said of puppets that their lifelessness is a function of the way that they move. They communicate directly to us through the proprioceptive sense. The manner of this transmission is described by Merleau-Ponty: 'I can understand the function of the living body only by enacting



3 *Second Life Map*



4 *Flying in Second Life, image by the author*

it myself, and only insofar as I am a body'. A puppet's movement interpolates between the way that it is made (materials, joints, relative weights of parts and tolerances) and the way that it is handled. Their character is their gesture. Similarly, when one is asked to create an avatar, there is a vast realm of decisions which can be made. Naturally any form imaginable can be assembled, but they can also adopt characteristic movements. Animations may be chosen from a menu of standard gestures, and there are special stores in which to purchase Animation Overrides (AO). Avatar character manifests in the combination and deployment of these gestures.

The hands of my children know the movements on the keyboard to initiate these passages, the way mine mastered piano keys. There is also a translation, but one can learn to think in another language. Should I ever fully inhabit an avatar, these finger arrays will no doubt become haptically enfolded in me, in the way that I think words digitally (ie, with my fingertips), enacting typing sequences as I fall asleep. In the case of my avatar, there is a

feedback between the body that gestures and the gestures that respond. A puppeteer feels the soul of her *daimon* in the brain in her fingers. 'My (superior) AO set me apart from my friends – who even now can recognise me on a new alt by my AO style alone' writes a reviewer. One of the best places to buy gestural animations calls itself Oracul. An oracle is a medium through whom advice or prophecy was sought from the gods in classical antiquity. Awaiting the Divinities. These people know precisely what they are up to. We are back to Heidegger's dwelling in the fourfold.

Dwelling in our bodies: texture

The best avatars are also defined by the high quality of the textures they use. Avatars are constructed in multiple layers, including skin, tattoo and clothing, laid over a mesh. The quality of the mesh construction is very important in form making. The best mesh constructions interact with superb textures to create tactility. The resolution of the textures, and the way they map over a detailed mesh engages the tactile sense. We long to touch.

Dwelling in our bodies: parallax vision
Texture, not applied over form, but replacing form produces a third kind of experiential phenomena I would like to propose as a provocation to our sense of dwelling. One of the most beautiful *topoi* in *Second Life* is called Alirium Gardens. One wanders among the dappled patterns of varied sylvan foliage, light streaming through layers of leaves, shafts of light, motes and butterflies drifting past. Instead of textures applied to rough form meshes of trees or plants, Alirium consists of innumerable micro-thin screens, suspended in space at various curvatures and scales, and imprinted with textural imagery. This lends itself particularly well to evoking the formless – shifting fields of grasses, pond surfaces with half-submerged lily pads. Most of the screenshots available on the web suggest more fully resolved pictorial images, but the phenomenological beauty of the place is the shifting relationships of layered textures as one walks through the veils, and the way that one can sometimes catch the edges of their planar unreality. A lived condition of vision is substituted here for a supposed reality of form.

Dwelling: among the immortals
Your article, Aikaterini, focuses at *On the Earth* and *Under the Sky*. These details of the phenomenal experiences of *Second Life* situate us *Among the Mortals*, in the sense of dwelling in our bodies. No doubt a surprising assertion, which can only be accepted if we substitute for the sad and angry idea of 'mere' visibility the beautiful lived reality of 'the look' of the artist and the architect, of the lover and the maker, 'the look' of Merleau-Ponty which 'envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things'. Heidegger defined art as a clearing. In *Second Life*, we create ourselves as puppets and haptically, chiasmically, become both puppet and puppeteer. I, for one, live in the world in a way best described by Merleau-Ponty's trope of the Chiasm [from *The Visible and the Invisible*] and offer it as a way in which the gestures and textures of *Second Life* can inaugurate my sense of dwelling:

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but

also between the tangible and the visible. Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world.

Returning to the liveliness of the inanimate puppet, it seems that our urge to touch is heightened by our inability to do so, our virtual gestural occupation by its necessary translation into an other set of manual gestures. It is an important and frequently overlooked part of the essay *Building Dwelling Thinking* that Heidegger reminds us that the fourfold is always occupied from within in its own negation – we understand Being among the Mortals, for example, by understanding *memento mori* – remembering our own death. We 'await the divinities' to the extent that we apprehend their utter remoteness from us. This aspect of cultivating the fourfold is captured well by Jennifer Slatman's beautiful article 'The Sense of Life: Husserl and Merleau-Ponty Touching and Being Touched':

If there were something like 'the sense of life' it would be the sense of touch. [W]ithout a body there is nothing that touches. But of course the body as such is not a sufficient precondition of life. Bodies can be dead as well [...] the full sense of life only comes to the fore if we also take into consideration this mere touchable or dead 'side', this thinghood of the body [...] Life can only be understood on the basis of the difference between living and inanimate or lifeless bodily matter.

Like the timeless cultural ritual enactment of puppets, the condition of avatar, and of the second body in *Second Life* allows us to 'experience our own being-alive while encountering, touching, its own being lifeless'.

Dwelling: awaiting the divinities
Your article, Aikaterini, focuses at *On the Earth* and *Under the Sky*. Your beautiful evocation of the Deleuze text, *Desert Islands* relative to the floating islands of *Second Life* draw us into the mythological intensity with which *Second Life* re-imagines dwelling:

This is to state once again that the essence of the deserted island is imaginary and not actual, mythological and not geographical.

The mythological similarly constitutes the phenomenological horizon of the formal construction of *Second Life* avatars, that same mythological which has always negotiated between 'among the immortals' and 'awaiting the divinities'. This mythological

emblematic horizon in *Second Life* can be extremely sophisticated.

To avatar, Ulmer reminds us, means to 'descend into flesh'. Avatar is a Hindu word, and an avatar is a deliberate descent of a deity to Earth, or a descent of the Supreme Being. It is mostly translated into English as 'incarnation', but more accurately as 'appearance' or 'manifestation'. Avatars both rely on and help to construct a deep and wide visual cultural mythology, circulating in image fragments, with all the immediate associational richness that a true visual culture can hold. An avatar holds and builds mermaid-ness in the same sense that Merleau-Ponty talks about the linguistic embeddedness of the word 'red' in the *Flesh of the World*:

[...] the quale itself counts for very little compared with these participations. Claudel has a phrase saying that a certain blue of the sea is so blue that only blood would be more red [...].

Can we think even for a minute that communally constructed visual languages at play are NOT a World?

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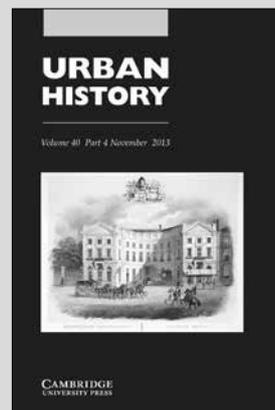
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