

IRENE SUNWOO –

In Front of Lines that Leave Something Behind: Exhibiting Boyarsky's AA

“What we need is *someone like Boyarsky*.” This exasperated plea was uttered, not long ago, by a member of a search committee tasked with the selection of a new dean for a prominent North American school of architecture. Indeed, over the past few years the demand for new heads of architecture schools in the U.S. has been unusually high. Among the heavy-hitters that have recently been in the market for new leadership are Princeton, Cooper Union, Columbia, MIT, Sci-Arc, and Princeton again. Add Yale to the mix, with Robert Stern’s imminent departure from the school in spring 2016, after a nearly two-decade-long run, and it would seem that something is in the academic air. Change? If so, from what? Perhaps it is too soon to say. For the moment, we could revisit the records of what was thought to be at stake in architectural education a decade ago. [1] Or we could turn to a steady stream of new scholarship on post-’68 pedagogical innovations and reforms, which continues to gently poke contemporary educators in the ribs. [2]

It was in a similar spirit that this nameless committee member nominated Alvin Boyarsky (1928–1990), chairman of the Architectural Association in London from 1971 to 1990, as a role model—for lack of a better description—for her peers. Over the past few decades celebratory accounts of his career, often penned by his colleagues, have maintained his somewhat mythic status. More recent studies, however, have begun to unpack the complexity of his pedagogy through archival research. Among these is the recent exhibition “Drawing Ambience: Alvin Boyarsky and the Architectural Association,” which debuted in St. Louis at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University (September 2014–January 2015) and will travel to the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in Providence (April–August 2015).

As chairman of the AA, Boyarsky choreographed what is widely acknowledged as a golden era in the school’s history and, within that context, a strand of postmodern architectural culture that was driven less by historicist navel-gazing than it was by an uninhibited transgression of the discipline’s outer limits. By jettisoning a professionalized curriculum that had been institutionalized at the AA in the wake of the Second World War, and by introducing a competitive framework of studios known as the unit system, Boyarsky incubated an experimental “market place” model of education. On the one hand, students were presented with an array of design studios to choose from, and on the other hand, tutors were pressured to produce new theoretical positions through their

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[1] See “Deans List,” the *Architect’s Newspaper*, (September 7, 2004), <http://archpaper.com/news/articles.asp?id=097#.VOi6qcbNTgU>.

[2] For examples, see Arindam Dutta, ed., *A Second Modernism: MIT, Architecture and the “Techno-Social” Moment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Ana María Leòn, “Prisoners of Ritoque: The Open City and the Ritoque Concentration Camp,” *Journal of Architectural Education* vol. 66 no. 1 (2012):84–97; Joan Ockman, ed., *Three Hundred Years of Architectural Education in North America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); and the exhibition “Radical Pedagogies: Action-Reaction-Interaction,” a global survey organized by a research team from Princeton University and included in the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale.

teaching. During his tenure, that production took many forms within the unit system, from Nigel Coates' neo-Baroque urban narratives to the phenomenological investigations of Dalibor Vesely, or Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zengheli's critical reengagement with Constructivism.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the kaleidoscopic range of theoretical queries that the AA unit system helped launch was augmented by the chairman's rigorous expansion of the school's exhibition and publication programs, which created platforms for original historical research and ongoing architectural investigations by both AA tutors and fellow travelers. Among many others, the latter included Alexander Brodsky, Coop Himmelblau, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, John Hejduk, Mary Miss, Eduardo Paolozzi, Michael Webb, and Lebbeus Woods. Boyarsky's chairmanship has been a touchstone for educators and institutions over the past few decades. Iterations of the unit system's "market place" model have infiltrated schools outside of the AA (notably the Bartlett and Columbia), and integration of exhibition and publication programs at schools of architecture today seems to be par for the course. [3]

"Drawing Ambience" makes a significant contribution to an expanding body of research on Boyarsky and the AA, and does so by exploring the convergence of three areas of production in which he was deeply invested—drawings, publications, and exhibitions. [4] Its approach and focus is highly original. Co-curated by Igor Marjanovic (associate professor of architectural design at the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University) and Jan Howard (curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the RISD Museum), the exhibition showcases thirty architectural drawings from Boyarsky's personal collection in London. In addition to these works, most of which were produced and given to him as gifts in the 1980s, the exhibition includes a selection of publications that he initiated during his chairmanship, and which document AA exhibitions of contemporary architects. The works on display, as the supporting curatorial wall texts suggest, together offer a framework for understanding his "pedagogical approach" and a "time of change and experimentation in the field of architecture, both at the AA and worldwide." [5]

Despite the expectations for "Drawing Ambience" to unpack the intersection of architectural drawing, education, and postmodernism—to be sure, an incredibly timely endeavor, given the rise of digital representation, the changing of the guards at schools, and a renewed historical interest in postmodern debates and practices—its curatorial methodology and, as a consequence, its argumentation are at times illegible. As a result, we are often forced to read between the lines, so to speak.

With a marquee of thirty-four architects and artists, the exhibition boasts an intriguing mix of media darlings and more low-key mavericks. [6] (For the record, even counting the London-based Zaha Hadid, only three of these figures hail from outside Europe and North America; in total, "Drawing Ambience" includes five women). Works by some of the usual suspects—AA tutors from the 1970s and 1980s, like Hadid, Coates, Mike Gold, David Greene, Peter Salter, Bernard Tschumi, Peter Wilson—are interspersed with drawings by a handful of AA students (Jeremie Frank's is a show-stopper) and a motley crew of visitors to the AA (see above list of fellow travelers). There is a provocative range of ideas and work here, spanning from iconic projects (Tschumi's studies for Parc de la Villette) to more obscure fantasies (Franco Raggi's irreverently

[3] During the early 1990s reorganization of studio teaching took place at the Bartlett under the leadership of Peter Cook, and at Columbia during Bernard Tschumi's deanship. Both Cook and Tschumi were AA tutors during Boyarsky's chairmanship and have each acknowledged the unit system as a model for their own institutional approach to design pedagogy.

[4] The *Drawing Ambience* exhibition catalog only became available to the author as this review reached completion; the following critique therefore focuses primarily on the exhibition.

[5] All quotations drawn from exhibition wall texts.

[6] The full roster of participants includes Alexander Brodsky, Nigel Coates, Peter Cook, Coop Himmelblau, Peter Eisenman, Jeremie Frank, Frank Gehry, Michael Gold, David Greene, Zaha Hadid, John Hejduk, Andrew Holmes, Kisa Kawakami, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, Christopher MacDonald, Stefano de Martino, Marion Mashedier, Mary Miss, Eduardo Paolozzi, Rodney Place, Franco Purini, Franco Raggi, Peter Salter, Superstudio, Shin Takamatsu, Bernard Tschumi, Ilya Utkin, Alex Wall, Michael Webb, Peter Wilson, Lebbeus Woods, Elia Zengheli, Zoe Zengheli.

charming sketch of what appears to be a drag race between classical temples mounted atop mobile mattresses). An excerpt from Michael Webb's *Temple Island* series is a welcome reminder of his obsessively precise and absolutely manic studies of movement in space. A suite of works by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (Rem Koolhaas, Stefano de Martino, Alex Wall, Elia Zenghelis, and Zoe Zenghelis) drive home how crucial different modalities of representation—from the dynamism of the Constructivist axonometric to the spatial simultaneity of the section—were in the communication of OMA's polemics.

In a simple but elegant presentation, each drawing and its individual cosmos of ideas is able to shine, offering virtuosic testimony to the synergy between architectural representation and architectural thinking. This synergy is taken to exquisite heights in the display of publications, and in particular the *Box* and *Folios* series, AA exhibition catalogs comprising boxed sets of reproductions of drawings by contemporary architects. The exhibition designers, the London-based architecture firm Boyarsky Murphy (Nicholas Boyarsky and Nicola Murphy, Alvin's son and daughter-in-law), have crafted spectacular displays in large custom-made vitrines. Inside of these, sheets of drawings are layered, suspended, and contorted in what amounts to a succession of animated mini-exhibitions.

The exhibition is convincing in its assertion that architectural drawing was a central aspect of Boyarsky's institutional activities and relationships. [7] But "Drawing Ambience" seems either unable or unwilling to move past this rather general observation and to complicate its subject of study. To simply state that for Boyarsky "drawing was not only a representational medium but also a form of architecture in its own right" is hardly satisfactory. This is an argument that is by no means unique to Boyarsky or the AA, but is a kind of pep talk strategically reprised by the discipline (in times of need, so it would seem). [8] His promotion of drawings, exhibitions, publications, and the discourses surrounding these modes of production does not (in my mind at least) fully constitute a "pedagogical approach," but is part of a much bigger picture, which is only vaguely alluded to as the AA's "special ambience."

[7] Many of the (original) drawings are inscribed with touching dedications to their recipient. For example, "To Alvino—with love. Zaha Sep 86."

[8] For a recent example, see Sam Jacobs, "Drawing as Project—Post Digital Representation in Architecture," *Strange Harvest*, <http://strangeharvest.com/drawing-as-project-post-digital-representation-in-architecture>. But also see Robin Evans, "Translations from Drawing to Building," *AA Files* no. 12 (Summer 1986). Indeed, the lack of engagement with Evans's theories on drawing and representation—developed while he was a tutor at the AA during the 1980s—in the exhibition catalog's introductory essay is an unfortunate missed opportunity.



Custom-made vitrines. Installation views, "Drawing Ambience: Alvin Boyarsky and the Architectural Association," Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, September 12, 2014–January 4, 2015. Photograph by Whitney Curtis.

Herein lies the curatorial conundrum, as I see it: Aside from a small selection of archival documents, relegated to vitrines toward the show's conclusion, and one iPad with an automated slide show on the history of the AA, narrated by Boyarsky (we will return to this), the exhibition does little to provide context—biographical, institutional, historical, or intellectual—for Boyarsky's collection of drawings. Ironically, then, the exhibition is conceptually stunted by its overemphasis and, by extension, fetishization of the drawings themselves as objects, in all their iterations as "originals" or as reproductions—a distinction that is problematically left unaddressed. (I was, for example, perplexed by the inclusion of a set of Superstudio posters. Were these posters on display because their graphic layout included the group's architectural drawings as illustrations? Or, in the absence of "originals," was this a gesture to validate Superstudio's use of montage as a form of drawing?)



Museum-goers take in the drawings from plush club chairs. Installation view from "Drawing Ambience: Alvin Boyarsky and the Architectural Association," Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, September 12, 2014–January 4, 2015. Photograph by Whitney Curtis.

But as it turns out, maybe casting Boyarsky's drawing collection as being somehow *out of place* and *out of time*—à la Walter Benjamin's hermetic dream world of the collector—was the intention all along. A specific moment in the central gallery of the exhibition suggests that this is the case. There, we learn that the title of the show "refers to the imaginary space that architectural drawings evoke, but also to the physical ambience in which they were displayed, collected, and discussed"—more specifically, the "AA's unique club-like atmosphere" and Boyarsky's "similarly laid-out family home." An extended account of the décor, color palette, rooms, and building renovations at the AA's premises in London hints that among the exhibition's top priorities is to simulate the ambiguously defined "special ambience that characterized Boyarsky's office and the halls of the AA." A pair of club chairs are installed to evoke (and conflate) both spaces, inviting visitors to pause, recline, and take in the immediate view—three Daniel Libeskind drawings, one by Lebbeus Woods, and publications in vitrines.

The feel of the club chairs, the sound of Boyarsky's voice, the period photographs of populated AA interiors, blown-up floor-to-ceiling and enveloping the galleries—these flourishes too often transform the drawings into part of the scenery, inhibiting a more meaningful dialogue between them and,

ultimately, a more articulate curatorial statement about them. Though stunning in its presentation and rich in content, “Drawing Ambience” takes the notion of *ambience* too far, and the matter of *drawing* not far enough.