Ute Poerschke: Teaching Philosophy

Mastership in architecture cannot be learned in a five-year degree. Many years of observing the built environment, designing, re-designing, experiencing space and materials, and questioning the meaning of the social, technical, and aesthetic environment lead to mastership in architecture. If this is indeed the case, what do we teach our students within the five years? In my view, we need to teach most of all long-life learning, persistent curiosity, methods of critical thinking, and the understanding that the technical information learned in a course is only the foundation from which to find the most recent information at a given time. I challenge myself to find ways to have these larger goals shine through my teaching wherever possible.

Architectural design seeks spatial answers to social, technical, and aesthetic needs – all at the same time. For me, designing architecture means finding a balance between integrating a space or building into a larger context and expressing its individuality: on the one hand, a piece of architecture needs to become part of its surroundings, while on the other hand, it needs to demonstrate its meaning, its right to occupy a site that is unique in the world. Living can be considered a similar act of synthesis, as we wish to find a balance between being a part of a community and living our individuality, while managing many practical needs life requests from us. Therefore, architecture can be a way of thinking about life. Vice versa, reflecting on our practical lives can inform us about what architecture could be. Through my fourteen years of teaching, I have found that comparing architectural design with the reflection on life is one of the most powerful methods to make students think and learn about architecture and understand why it has the potential to be an art. Through the discussions with students about the meaning of architecture, the profession of an architect, and our own lives, I've learned that finding meaning and a place in the world is the most urgent question for young people.

Being an architect is a collaborative and interdisciplinary task, which requires the integration in a planning team, respect for other opinions, but also to insist and fight for ones own beliefs. How can we teach this? In my courses, advising, and discussions, I try to create an environment in which I am part of the learning community by including learning content that is partially new territory to me. By addressing new topics in the classroom, for example from my own research, I become part of the learning group, and I have observed that this stimulates independent thinking and initiative of the entire group. With the same intention and as part of my courses, I assist students with exhibiting and presenting their work, as they did for example in the HUB 2009, the Erie Maritime Museum 2012, and at a community meeting in Pittsburgh 2013.

Learning experiences often happen outside of class. Student initiatives create in-depth learning environments, and mentoring students enriches my own teaching. One example is advising the organization *Students for Environmentally Enlightened Design (SEED)*. For *SEED*'s current project – building a library in a shipping container to be sent to an African refugee camp – we have discussed the actual design, ethical questions, and fundraising. Another example is mentoring a group of students who built for almost a year a *Heliodon*, which is an interactive device to visualize the sun path. The instrument has become a free source for all students to study hands-on the impact of solar radiation on their design projects. As a third example, I advised the students who organized the first graduate student conference in the Architecture Department, mainly on the challenges of time-management. Another way to support independent learning has been to open up opportunities for undergraduate students to participate in conferences. Aside from that, creating strong learning moments can be as simple as being available when students want to share their observations after public lectures. Unforgettable for me is the discussion after Daniel Libeskind's lecture in 2007, when we discussed for hours how the World Trade Center competition connects architecture and society. All examples have become powerful opportunities to support personal engagement and perseverance, both needed for long-life learning and mastership not only of architecture.

In my role as second- and third-year coordinator, I have observed for many years that teaching and learning is the most inspiring and enjoyable when the faculty succeeds in creating an open and reliable environment in which we are able to freely and critically share our teaching and learning experiences. Identifying methods to create and support such environments is of high interest to me, as well as proactively working on up-to-date curricula, as we did in 2008, when my colleagues and I organized the symposium *Environmentally Conscious Design – Educating Future Architects.*

I wish to encourage students to live one life and not many – a teaching, a student's, an administrative, a family, a practitioner's life. In best case, one part enriches the other, and all parts form a whole. Architecture provides endless examples of how to integrate our divers interests, as it touches questions of the everyday, diversity, time and money, social justice, environmental stewardship, spaces for living together, and beauty. Integrating this complexity is when powerful education occurs.