

How the Invisible Stays That Way: Sociology on Architects

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I have spent the past few years trying to develop a coherent sociological description of architects, their profession, and the profession's history. Of all the disciplines, sociology is, I think, the best equipped for seeking out the hidden operations of the architectural field. After all, sociology's existence is predicated on the assumption that nothing is quite what it seems in the world of human relations.

One of the problems of searching for the hidden and the invisible is in convincing people that there really is something to be found. Psychology, a sibling discipline also engaged in searching for the hidden, seems to have no problem with this. Most people seem happy to believe that there are hidden processes in their own minds of which they know nothing. Architects have readily accepted the psychological findings about themselves, even taking on board some of the less flattering discoveries, such as their general bossiness and unsociability.¹

Sociologists have a harder time being taken seriously. The reception of my own studies of the profession, summarised in *The Favored Circle*, has revealed some resistance to a sociological analysis of the hidden.² I have been told by any number of architects that they know perfectly well what is going on in their social world; after all, they live it each day. What can you possibly discover that we do not already know? To drive the point home a little further, some remark that, since I am not a practising architect, I cannot hope to understand what is going on.³

In a way, they have a point. Sociologists try to explain our everyday experience of the world, our own closest experiences, in terms that are not so close, often in terms of things that we do not and cannot have any direct experience of at all. We sociologists try to point out that there are invisible processes operating beneath the surface of social appearances. But, of course, whereas we say, look, here is the invisible, others say, *there is nothing to be seen*.

Part of the problem, I think, lies in the fundamentally different attitudes that architecture and sociology take towards people. Sociology has always been, in the main, the sociology of the underdog. Why do some groups stay at the bottom of the social ladder? What prevents some from succeeding? Why is wealth unequally distributed? Most sociologists find the most interesting and vexing questions are to be found in studying those whom they consider to be the oppressed and the downtrodden. Architecture has always been the architecture of the heroic. I always found that *The Fountainhead* got a rousing reception from my architecture students. Those buildings we call 'architecture' are invariably buildings of power and taste made for people of power and taste, buildings for society's heroes. And their creators, the great architects, stride like colossi through the history books, fighting to actualise their singular visions.

From this follows another point: architecture has always been about the individual. The field has never been happy about attributing the great works to collectives, and even in this day where dozens of architects from several firms may work on a single large structure, the field usually tries to attribute the creation to a single *auteur*. Sociology, of course, is by definition concerned with groups.

Another part of the problem is that many people have difficulty seeing that sociologists' problems really are problems. One of the questions I tried to answer was why some architects are successful and others are not. The initial problem is to dissect the term 'successful' and understand that there are two quite different ways in which an architect can be successful. No one would deny that attaining high office in the American Institute of Architects, or running the largest firm in the country, would count as outstanding success. This is one form, and consists of high position in professional and economic power structures. Frank Lloyd Wright achieved no success at all in this sense. But he did achieve success in what we could call an intellectual or symbolic or non-economic sense. The two are quite distinct, and it is very rare for individuals to achieve both, a fact remarked upon by several observers.

This non-obvious difficulty resolved, to most people it would be self-evident that success in the Wrightian sense is due simply to talent. Some more astute observers might also add ‘opportunity’. But this cannot explain, for example, the simple empirical fact that architects (and other visual artists) are drawn from the upper strata of society, and that the higher the stratum of origin, the greater the chances of success. Lower middle-class families don’t often produce architects. Not—and this is an important point—because someone is actively discouraging their children from following that career, but because it does not occur to them that architecture is a suitable occupation. Nursing, the police, teaching and accountancy are typical occupations that they contemplate entering— but not architecture. Architects spring from families much higher up the socioeconomic ladder, and the most successful from the very highest.

This observation is not original to me. My contribution was to provide further evidence, and to produce an explanation for it. What I find interesting is the invisibility of this fact. It was first noted a century ago, and has been rediscovered several times since.⁴ Each time the fact was dismissed as irrelevant. Briefly brought into view, the commentators looked right through it, and once again it became invisible.

Why should class origin be so important to success in architecture (and other visual arts)? Partly because of the access to the right people that it gives to aspirants. The sociological term for this is ‘social capital’. The talented must have the opportunity to show their talent, and these opportunities are most readily provided by knowing people with resources. The most obvious resource is money, since the art of architecture requires for its actualisation resources vastly greater than those of any other art save for cinema. But there are other, more readily obtained resources that can be leveraged from social capital. Knowing the gatekeepers of the great galleries and museums, or working with a great architect, or coming to the attention of the right journal editor, can lead to exhibitions of drawings, publicity through catalogues, or an article or two. Those who run the museums and galleries can’t get you the money to build, but they can display your unbuilt work to the world. It is no accident that many of the great architects have begun their careers by drawing, not by building.

As another example, consider what architecture schools do. Teach skills and provide knowledge, of course, but rather more than that. They also provide the social induction that the young architect-to-be must have. Every profession inculcates a value system into its students, although most of these values remain obscured and unsaid. The diploma the student receives after so many years not only certifies that they have certain skills, but that they possess a general level of culture. Ways of acting, of talking, of dressing; attitudes, dispositions, tastes must all be instilled. What books should be read, which films should be seen. The student must learn all the cultural aspects of what it is to be an architect. More than in many other jobs, being a successful architect means not only knowing but being. You cannot become cultivated by reading books, only by personal dealings with those whom you wish to become. Hence the longevity of the studio system in architectural education, with its intense interactions, so different from the impersonal lecture rooms of the other disciplines. Hence, also, the absence of long-distance or correspondence education in architecture. You won't find architectural design in the Open University's curricula (architectural history—yes, design—no).

All this operates both completely openly and completely invisibly. This has been referred to as the hidden curriculum, but this implies someone is actively hiding something. I don't think this is true. Teachers teach in the best of faith. That they are teaching also what is a veritable way of life— I have often heard of architecture described as a 'calling'— is a process that occurs beneath the consciousness of any of the individuals involved. No one asks that the student acquire all the tacit and unsaid cultural qualities that are part of the architectural role, but all the subtle pressures of teacher expectations and those of fellow students gently push the individual into the right paths.

All the most powerful social forces operate invisibly. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, upon whose work my analysis is based, attributes their power to two attributes that he calls naturality and misrecognition. By naturality he means the fact that so many processes are taken to be simply the natural order of things. They are accepted without question as the perfectly natural way of doing things. Alternatives are never thought about because the rightness of the social world is taken as self-evident. Of course the studio system is the heart of architectural education. How else could you teach design? Why does anyone have to explain why there are so few women or ethnic minority architects? That's just the way things are. Of course the great architects are persons of taste and discernment. How could it be otherwise?

By misrecognition, Bourdieu refers to the fact that the social forces bearing upon each of us are misperceived. Typically, these forces are misperceived as perfectly legitimate demands imposed upon us. Many architects decide that one way to get on is to become active in their local professional association. Is this not a perfectly reasonable demand upon my time? The life of the architecture student towards assessment time is a notoriously sleepless one. Indeed, students will boast of the long nights they have spent at the drawing board. Those who spend their time gadding about town instead of hunched over their work are disdained by their fellows and their professors. Have you no dedication? Don't you care? But no one explicitly demands these things. They are self-imposed requirements, and it is this self-imposition that makes them so potent.

These attributes of naturality and misrecognition render quite invisible many social processes to those subjected to them. Only outsiders see the arbitrariness of the social order. A construction worker (or an accountant or nurse or whatever) attending the premier of an architectural exhibition at MOMA will see a wholly different social world to that perceived by the other attendees. What is perfectly natural and completely invisible to them will stand out only too clearly to the person for whom this is an alien social universe.

The sociologist therefore faces quite a struggle when trying to render visible the hidden social forces to those who are directly affected by them. The task would be easier were I writing about architects for a quite different sort of audience— other sociologists, perhaps.

There is a further complication. Sociological conclusions are often quite controversial. This is not unexpected: the discourse of architecture is, and must be, controversial; because, of course, this is how intellectuals make their living, and how they make their way up the hierarchies of their field. But, unlike much of this discourse, sociological work often threatens vested interests. So, for example, one direction my research was pointing to was that architecture should leave the universities and return to some sort of structured apprenticeship system. This is hardly likely to be accepted by the academics who comprise a large part of that research's intended audience. Nor would it be accepted by the profession, who naturally prefer to see the cost of training borne by others, and for whom this would represent a devaluation of their own qualifications.

And that is the final reason why the invisible stays that way. It is so often in the interests of powerful players for it to do so. Acting in the best of faith, they nonetheless disguise, to themselves as to others, their self-interest as disinterest; and can say not that the invisible is revealed, but that there is nothing to be seen.

¹ D. W. MacKinnon, "The Personality Correlates of Creativity: A Study of American Architects," *14th International Congress of Applied Psychology* 1962, 11-39.

² G. Stevens, *The Favored Circle* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998)

³ I do have a degree in architecture, but to these critics it seems that only *practising* architects can produce a description of the field.

⁴ T. B. Saunders, "Architectural Education: Germany (with Austria and Switzerland)," *Architectural Record* 13 (1903): 178.