

what is a school culture?

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The other day at the Town Hall meeting something amazing happened. Sitting across the table from some fellow students in a room filled with the aroma of Chicken-Tikka-Masala, voices in 50 different accents, and bodies weaving around each other in an agile group tango, for the first time in a long time since coming to MIT I felt connected. It was bizarre, but somehow liberating and powerful.

How could a group dinner in a small seminar room have such a profound effect?

Thinking about this experience has made me wonder what it is that makes a school actually 'work'. What are we here for? What do we hope to get from this place, and what do we hope to leave behind? For architects, this question goes straight to the heart of what we do. **We leave things behind for others to inhabit.** And we tend to think these things *mean* something.

But if we are honest, buildings are not the only things we inhabit. In fact they may actually rank fairly low in the hierarchy. Of all the overlapping **'infrastructures' we use every day**—languages, traditions, transportation networks, laws, curricula, machines, institutions, technologies and family structures—none are as well used and powerful as the overarching but foundational and specific infrastructure of 'culture'.

If so, what is culture, and what 'use' does it have for us here in the Department of Architecture?

These questions and answers both begin with the concept 'us' and 'we'—*But how dangerous and radical to think that there can ever be such a thing as 'we'*. And, as many have found at MIT, how difficult to find and describe such an 'us' or 'we' at this school.

Maybe this is a good thing...

After all, who wants to be saddled with a collection of 'ways of doing things' that don't reflect our own individual interests and values? Hard battles were fought on this front through Critical Theory and Identity Politics, with leaders like Foucault, Said, Derrida, and Judith Butler. Through their work (and many others) came a 'freedom' from the repression of dominant and authoritarian structures and voices. But is it possible that that this legacy, is both a luxury and a curse?

Without a 'we' of some kind, where is trust and communication?

Along these lines, some of our own faculty promote design ideology that is fundamentally contingent and relative. From this position, a well-lubricated nebulosity (see blob, morph and mutation) has emerged as the paradigm of a so-called 'new praxis'. It does seem amazingly convenient, however, that this tendency to dissolve standards and collective values has also weakened the frameworks of accountability used to measure professorial performance. Mostly, though, this pedagogy is simply institutionalised rhetorical hypocrisy: Find someone who truly "lives the morph", i.e. a thorough relativism, and you have found a genuine psychopath.

What is so often forgotten is that, even in our wildest fantasies of mutation, **changes become something**; they have life, agency and in so doing pass on traits that become identifiable and reproducible. In order to live—they become *normal*. In fact the whole historiography of life origins is wrapped up in "the origin of the species", or put another way, the origin of *specificity*—why 'we' are the 'way' we are. In this broad view the 'we' is humanity, and although Critical Theory would contest both the 'we' and the 'way' as hegemonic, most of us don't have to dig too deep to find a conviction that people should be treated differently than say, jellyfish, notwithstanding some foundational respect for both.

With this in mind maybe it is reasonable to distinguish one thing from the other at a basic level; to create standards and expectations that begin to structure the worlds we create, inhabit and challenge. The question for us at MIT Architecture becomes this: **can and should we have a unique school culture?**

If we truly want to leave something behind for others to inhabit, then this is worth thinking about. What are values that connect us? We could start making a list, and it wouldn't take long to come up with some basics. Not everyone is likely to agree. In fact maybe this faith in individual commitment and viewpoint is one of our core values. But if we feel there is something valuable about each other's presence, about our differences and our shared passions, these can become something to build on, a framework to elevate our communication and research—something inspirational, instructional and challenging to both the newcomer and those who have been around for a while. **Culture is always in need of revision**, always revealing its own deficiencies even as it empowers its inhabitants to sense and communicate in a particular way. Maybe

because of this, culture is a matrix, a bridge between who and what we are now, and who we will be in the future. It is cumulative, participatory and dialogical.

We could wait out our two or three years here with a resigned mixture of frustration and inspiration. We could go back to Italy or Iowa, Canada, Greece, China or California with an MIT degree that allows us to confer prestige on our independent research and careers. But in doing this, we are basically sapping the institution and devaluing its reputation—the same reputation we feel so entitled to invoke in our interviews and CVs. We could, on the other hand, build something—something much more challenging and risky than another laser-cut chipboard model, art installation or research paper to add to a portfolio.

Let's think about how an MIT school culture might be shaped, and what would make it sustainable. What kind of structure would we like to live and learn in while we are here; and what would we like to leave for others to inhabit and renovate after we leave? Hopefully this will require some changes to pedagogies, faculty, space, systems, policies, themes, lectures, etc... The list is long and will require constant attention; but isn't this what designers do?

We make meaningful, useable space. So, let's get construction under way.