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Show and Tell: Symbolic Identity of the Architectural Profession [1]

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Community and Identity

In a previous article in which we looked at the formation of groups and identities within the creative arts, we defined community in terms of expressed similarities between its members and differences in relation to other communities (Biggs et al., 2011). In the present paper we discuss the ways in which community similarity and distinction is expressed and the reason why members feel that it is necessary to express their sense of identity and belonging through shared behaviours and symbolism.

The identification of a community assumes two aspects: the existence of likeness and similarity within the community, and the existence of difference and dissimilarity between one group and another that is culturally expressed and sufficient to differentiate one group from the other. These differences may be very clear, and visible to any observer, or they may be very subtle, and visible only to those closely involved in differentiating themselves from the other. Although these could be seen as two sides of the same coin, some authors hold that for the definition of a community, similarity and universality are of primary importance (Geertz, 1973), whilst others focus more on the documentation of distinction (Kluckhohn & Strodbeck, 1961).

The underlying structure of community is largely intangible and difficult to model in a precise way. Studies of community tend to rely in the first place on some sort of expression of intangible shared values through which to begin reading and deciphering it. Following Schein (1985), Hofstede (1991) and Trice & Beyer (1984), Schjerven proposed that observed artefacts and creations, visible and audible behaviour patterns, along with symbols, heroes, and rituals; provide forms of practices through which meanings are expressed, affirmed and communicated to members (Schjerven, 2010). Thus we can understand a community not only by observing the actions they take in pursuit of their common interests, but also by observing their more indirect actions embodied in rituals and symbolic interaction.

Work in general, and professions in particular, can be a locus for establishing the core elements of community culture; its shared values, beliefs and assumptions. These communal forms convey ideological meanings that are learned by members of an occupation and distinguish one occupation from another through the creation of specific myths, stories, symbols, language and argot, rituals and taboos, rites and ceremonies. A profession can be defined as a group of people who claim the right to perform a distinctive set of tasks through the possession of a relatively distinct and unique knowledge base, and these groups formally exist when there is a consensus that certain individuals are expected to perform these tasks and to exercise degrees of control over how they are done (Trice, 1993). According to Trice, the general distinction between one

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profession and another is based on 'a systematic body of knowledge learned [in educational settings] and known only to members of the occupation' (Trice, 1993: 54). Likewise, Rothstein (2002) argues that certain attitudes, values, and behaviour can be attributed to differences in the educational culture of the respective disciplines. Architects form an example of a highly-trained community who express shared values, who differentiate themselves from other potentially similar professionals such as civil engineers, and whose work is authorized and regulated in the social space. Following these theories one should be able to observe both actions that seem to be directed towards common professional goals, and actions that seem to have a more symbolic function, being not so much directed towards such goals as towards symbolizing community similarities and maintaining dissimilarities from others. This paper takes architecture as an example of a professional group in which such symbolic behaviours can be observed.

The Identity of the Architect

In *Architecture: The Story of Practice*, Cuff (1992) observed architectural practice and systematized the findings into four key dualities that seemed to embody contradictions in the profession. These contradictions existed between the values held by the architect and the actual practice of architecture. In other words, the architect tended to speak and act in one way although the way they actually practiced architecture day-to-day was another way. First Cuff found there was a duality between the individual and the collective; second there was a duality between architecture as decision-making in contrast with architecture as sense-making; third there was a duality between architecture as design and art on the one hand, and architecture as business and management on the other; and fourth, there was a duality between the image of the architect as a specialist as opposed to a generalist. Although she found that all these dualities exist simultaneously in architectural practice, they are sustained owing to the values that a community holds of what it is to *be* an architect. What supports values that are opposed to empirical evidence are the symbolic myths about the profession. Cuff found that when a contradiction between myth and practice arouse, the profession chose to uphold the myth. This is understandable given the strength of the symbolic dimension of identity that we shall discuss in the second part of this paper.

Of course, mythologizing is not confined to architecture, but we will use architecture as a case study in this paper owing to Cuff's examination of architecture and our own experience. Nor, we should clarify at the outset, is mythologizing to be regarded as some kind of aberrant or deceitful behaviour, but rather as a positive way of reinforcing community identity through shared ideological meanings.

In Cuff's description of the archetypal architect she reveals that the 'individual versus collective' duality permeates much of the other mythologizing that sustains the archetype. The myth itself is that the architect in his or her purest, idealized form, works alone and is the source of the creative energy that results in 'great architecture'. This contrasts with the reality that Cuff observed, that for the majority of the time the everyday reality of the work of the architect is that he or she works as part of a team and it is this collective that generates the resulting architecture. The myth that epitomizes the solitary, uncompromising architect sustains the corresponding prejudice that collaboration leads to mediocrity.

The myth is reproduced in training, more particularly in the studio environment, in which the

master-apprentice model fuels the ideal of the archetypal architect as genius and of the archetypal architectural practice as founded on individual inspiration rather than collective perspiration. Although such training has been rationalized (Schön, 1983), in this paper we concentrate on viewing the phenomenon from a symbolic perspective. In this myth, a studio training session would involve a student who is to regard the master architect as a god-like entity. The master architect is superior because here is an individual who can sweep in and who, coming into contact with the design problem only very briefly and through the visual medium, is able to identify it and understand it. Then, through spontaneous architectural sketching, the master architect produces the design solution through inspiration. Doing architecture is thus symbolised as an individual act. This format of training also propagates the duality between skill as an objective training and as a demonstration of membership. The question then becomes whether it the case that in order to successfully design, the architect must sketch, i.e. architectural practice requires the ability to sketch; or whether the architect sketches by definition, i.e. to sketch is to be an architect.

The studio environment in which architectural training and education is conducted also produces confusion as to the role of the architect in practice. Is the architect one individual in a mosaic of specialists or a qualified generalist, i.e. the fourth of Cuff's dualities? This is a duality that can be interpreted as also arising as a result of the fundamental myth that the individual contribution is superior, and more archetypical of the architect, than collaboration in a team. The high esteem with which the community holds the concept of authorship also comes into play in this scenario and is fostered in the studio-training model. In the studio, despite having occasion to work in teams, the architecture student is more often assessed individually. The role and individual contribution of each member of the team is separated, which might be argued as an academic assessment need but also might be explained as a preference to reinforce the symbolic over the actual professional practice. Although the architectural student is exposed to different formats of practice, we claim there is there is a hierarchy of valued behaviours in which individual authorship is superior to anonymous collaboration; inspired genius is superior to disciplined skill; natural talent over hard work and perseverance, etc.

It thus seems that the ineffability and indeterminacy of certain behaviours is valued more than that which is determinate, easily explained and understood by all. To have an intuitive 'feel', either for the problem or the solution, is a meaningful concept in the architectural ideal. Once again, despite practice-based evidence to the contrary, tangible hours spent struggling with the design solution pale in comparison when the solution-finding is recounted in contrast to the intangible contribution of the inspired moment of creation. The myth that creation is momentary, ineffable and quasi-divine exists in sharp contrast to the practical reality of the design process as experienced by most architects, summed up in the epithet '10% inspiration and 90% perspiration'. This understanding contributes a qualitative dimension to what could be regarded as a purely objective duality: 'design as decision-making or as sense-making'. The analytical characteristic of decision-making makes it too mechanistic and systematic to be associated to an archetype which idealizes the architect as intuitive and creative. On the other hand, the same analytical aspect that exists in the act of sense-making is played down so that this process might be seen as one of abstraction, and thus distanced from the mundane practicalities of designing. By distancing the archetypal architect from the practical matters of making decisions and solving problems, the alternative process of sense-making becomes transcendental and noble. Practical problem-solving negates the indeterminate nature of creativity. This suggests that the more practical the activity is, or is perceived to be, and the

more purposeful the behaviour; the less creative, symbolic and therefore less desirable.

This desire to distance oneself from mundane practicalities and align oneself to the loftier creative aspects of architectural practice may explain the duality between architecture associated to 'art as opposed to business management'. Despite the practical aspect of this duality – there are obviously artistic as well as managerial dimensions to architectural practice – noble status is attributed to the former in the architect archetype. Individual authorship is very important in the architectural community, as demonstrated by the common practice of referring to a project as 'a Niemeyer' or 'a Le Corbusier' regardless of the time that the master dedicated to that project. This reinforces the association of the architectural project to an artwork, in which concerns of production are overshadowed by the creative concerns of the artist. If we reflect on the day-to-day aspect of being a successful architect, it is clear that one also needs to have business savvy, however mythically the architect is presented as an individual whose mind is wrapped up in loftier matters of sense-making. Nevertheless, Cuff identified this symbolic attitude when interviewing the architect Michael Graves, who avoided a strict business-like approach to projects, claiming that his objective was not to make money. Such attitudes were found to be common when Larson (1977) surveyed professionals, many of whom professed to loose money on their projects when actually the projects were profitable.

Cuff thus describes in detail the structure of the architectural profession, explaining how the idealized view of the architect fuels and shapes the architectural archetype even in the face of opposing practical experience. However, she does not explain why it is that such an archetype arises, and why it does so in this particular configuration. She does not explore why the archetype embodies the values that individuality produces greatness while collaboration produces mediocrity; why it is nobler to create sense rather than to create solutions; why there is a drive to create, as opposed to manage the complexity of the design process; or why there remains a disjunction between professional training and the needs of the profession.

We might see Cuff's dualities as arising owing to the dual role of professional education as training in skills as well as enculturation in the professional ethos of the community (Delamont et al., 2000). However a Bourdieu-ian sociological framework of this kind would only explain how the architect archetype is passed on and reproduced over time, but not clarify why it is that it has taken the shape that it has. For the latter it is necessary to explore symbols and symbolic meaning in order to get at the underlying structure of the myths which sustain the archetype of the architect. This requires an anthropological framework which is more critical than descriptive. In the second part of this paper we take Cohen's (1985) theory of the symbolic construction of community in order to explore the dynamics which conspire to build the archetype of the architect that were described by Cuff.

The Symbolic Dimension of Architectural Identity

In *Symbolic Construction of Community*, dissatisfied with the mere descriptions of community differences and expressions of identity, Cohen (1985) proposed an explanatory framework that enabled the discussion of why and through what means communities express their identity. He proposed the 'boundary' as the element that embodies community discrimination and through which the members assert their uniqueness. He suggested that community members assert the distinctiveness of their community when they perceive a threat to the integrity of the boundaries that define it.

The boundary can be physical but it is more often a mental construct that exists in the perception of both the members of the community and the external onlooker who has a view of what kind of community that boundary defines. By focusing on the formation of a community's boundary, Cohen was able to explore the meaning that is attributed to the community identity, including the extra-physical symbolic dimension of identity. In this way, it is possible to understand how the members experience their community and how they go about expressing their membership of it. The identification of the boundary as having a strong symbolic element suggests that this definition is subjective, being clearly perceptible to some while being imperceptible to others. For example, some subcategories within the architectural profession may be very evident (and precious) to the insider, such as the distinction between urban planner as distinct from landscape architect; whereas to the outsider they may all fall under the undifferentiated label of architectural designer.

The role of symbolism in defining identity may be visibly manifested through behaviour, ritual, discourse, dress, etc. However, much of symbolism does not have a simple label but exists in terms of the individual meanings that are ascribed to relevant actions. What binds a community together is not that all the members ascribe the same meaning to these symbols, but rather the community express their bond through the use of common symbols (Cohen, 1985: 15). We can therefore reconsider as symbols the dualities that Cuff discovered in architectural identity.

The practical fact that architects work more often in groups than as individuals, despite the espoused value placed on working individually, reveals the 'lone genius' to be a symbol. It becomes part of the training of an architect to experience and to value working individually even though this might be seen as an unproductive or unhelpful training in the face of the practical need to know how to work collectively. Students who graduate from such training can be seen as being enculturated in the values that dub them as architects, rather than emerging having been trained in the skills that would enable them to practice as architects. We might differentiate 'being' an architect from 'doing architecture'.

Similarly, although the architect is clearly responsible for large numbers of decisions and for mobilizing a large team of people towards effective solutions and their implementation, the architect tends to emphasise the more intangible and philosophical property of sense-making, which has the symbolic quality of reinforcing the individual as visionary rather than technician. Focussing even more on the difference between the real-world solution-oriented approach and the nobler moments of creativity, the architect emphasises his activity as art rather than design. That Niemeyer's sketches are more like Picasso's than Costa's, is no accident. Given his training we can be sure that Niemeyer has a range of representational modes and techniques at his disposal. He could draw like Costa, but doesn't. We could regard his insistence on making sketches that have to be further interpreted in order to be construed as projects for building as some kind of perversity. However, understanding these as symbols of artistic creativity serves to explain the choice of a mode of representation that, unlike orthographic projection for example, does not have rules for interpretation as three-dimensional object. Finally, the fourth duality of specialist and generalist positions the architect as a latter-day Renaissance man. This is helpful in symbolising the god-like status of the architect as conceptual director rather than detailed maker. It seems superhuman that a single individual could possibly have the conceptual power to design a whole city, or even a complex individual building, and the practical fact, as Cuff found, is that they do not. Architects actually work collaboratively. They seek solutions and operate as designers rather than artists. Thus to symbolise them as generalist rather than

specialist further deifies their position, since to maintain such a spread of knowledge would seem to prevent them from ever mastering sufficient practical knowledge to implement a practical outcome.

In this sense, the symbolic dimension of a core architectural act such as sketching is less about producing a material representation of a design and more about expressing the architect-ness of the one who masters the skill. Indeed other professionals may also sketch and the formal characteristics of the resulting sketches may be very similar. However the subjectively constructed meaning of the act of sketching is linked to the identity of the community to which the sketcher intends to be aligned. The symbolic dimension of behaviour goes beyond the behaviour itself and has a rhetorical power of expressing identity. Symbolism is not manifested through qualities possessed by the thing-in-itself, but through the meanings that the actors invest in the symbol. This means that if we wish to understand more about sketching as a symbol of the archetypal architect, we should not look more closely at the act of sketching or at the sketch itself, but instead to the role of the act of sketching or of the sketch-object in symbolising the identity of the architectural community. The architect sketches, thereby expressing his architect-ness. The question we ask is how is it that certain acts, such as sketching, come to symbolise the identity of the architect while others which seem to be equally relevant to the practice of the profession, do not.

Although certain symbols are important to the construction of the identity of a community, the exact meaning of that symbol is less important. It is through the use of common symbols that members of a community show their membership and how communities are kept alive. This means that the content of the project that an architectural sketch is describing is less relevant for symbolising the sketcher as belonging to that community than the act of sketching itself. This becomes clear if we consider the formal qualities of sketches done by Niemeyer, for example. His sketches have very abstract, fluid and art-like qualities that serve as very poor technical representations of the project in question. The actual design characteristics of his project are difficult to decipher if one observes only his sketch. This indicates that Niemeyer's architect-ness is expressed not so much through the content of his designs as through the way in which he designs, i.e. through using symbols such as sketching, and through the production of sketch-objects that refer to artistic rather than constructional content.

It could be simplistically said that the role of community boundaries is to keep the similar in and the dissimilar out. Strategies for retaining that differentiation in relation to other communities are put in place when there is a perception of threat to the integrity of the characterising qualities. Indeed, when there is an apparent similarity between communities that are otherwise seen as distinct, for example between architects and civil engineers, strategies for differentiation become more assertive. When the differentiation between communities decreases, the drive for claiming, reasserting and reaffirming boundary distinctions increases. Depending on the nature of the threat, common symbols that are otherwise shared by different but neighbouring communities are reframed in order to counter that threat. For example, the architectural community is comfortable and proud on occasion to claim that this is an interdisciplinary activity that is composed of philosophical, constructive and aesthetic elements and dimensions. However when compared to or confused with the philosopher, the architecture community is quick to distinguish itself by claiming that the true architect draws or designs; when compared to the engineer, the distinction is that the architect has aesthetic concerns; when compared to the artist, the architect has technical expertise that enables urban construction, etc.

One should not confuse similarity of form with similarity of content. Although architects perform managerial tasks, the symbolic meaning is contained in the design tasks; the managerial tasks performed by the architect and by the entrepreneur may be the same but the symbolic content is different; i.e. the architect wants to distance themselves from the managerial tasks while the entrepreneur defines themselves in terms of the act of management. As described above, despite the fact that on paper the architect spends more time managing than designing, the design activity is what symbolises architectural practice.

Having established that certain activities in a profession such as architecture can take on symbolic rather than practical importance, let us conclude with an example. A material object with an objective function can be made to perform as a symbol of the creative archetype. It is common to embellish the functional aspect of such objects to the point of almost losing the functionality and retaining only the symbolic dimension. Consider the Le Corbusier glasses. Corbusier no doubt had poor eyesight, based on the fact that he wore glasses for the whole of his professional life. However, Corbusier's glasses are unusual, idiosyncratic, noticeable and have become iconic. Their embellished nature, going far beyond the mere need for lenses, is a cue to regard these as a symbol for him. Later they have become a symbol for us too. By creating such noticeable eyewear Corbusier not only made himself recognizable as an individual, i.e. not part of a group; but also focussed attention on his eyes as the source of seeing rather than just looking. By wearing such glasses Corbusier becomes a seer. If one wishes to adopt the same vantage-point one must also wear such glasses, as did Philip Johnson. Materially this can be interpreted as an homage, but symbolically all architects may need to have such sense-making equipment if they are to aspire to be as iconic as Corbusier. Thus we can identify a long line of architects and their glasses (La Ferla, 2003).

Cohen's theory does not require that all architects wear glasses. The symbolic element consists of the four ideals precipitated in Cuff's analysis of architectural practice: to be an individual, to be a sense-maker; to be an artist; and to be a generalist. Belonging to the community of architects requires that one shares these idealized values and to use common symbols to draw boundaries around them. How they are symbolized will vary from one case to another. In the case of Corbusier it is manifested in part through how he dresses, in the case of Niemeyer it is manifested in part through how he sketches, etc. It is the purpose of this paper to highlight that any embellished behaviour may point to its function as a symbol. It will symbolize a shared value, and if it is asserted we may infer that this is a core value shared by the community. Core values may not coincide with what seem to be the practical or required values of a community, but instead may be somewhat contradictory or surprising meanings when viewed from outside. Having shared and idiosyncratic values contributes to building a community, and as such they become reproduced from one generation to the next making it difficult to separate what is essential from what is merely ubiquitous.

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