

The Omrania | CSBE Student Award for Excellence in Architectural Design

Response from Academia to the Award's Jury Report

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This brief essay provides feedback on the comments and concerns raised by the jurors of The Omrania | CSBE Student Award for Excellence in Architectural Design regarding certain aspects of architectural education in Jordan. The jurors focused on the following points:

- 1- The overuse of computer and visual graphics in architectural design.
- 2- The sacrifice of function as well as social and cultural contexts for graphics, images, and arbitrary forms.
- 3- A heavy dependence on superficial readings of trendy vocabularies in architectural magazines and on the Internet, and the lack of an adequate reflection on the physicality and materiality of architecture.

The jurors noted that the current work of graduating students portrays an unhealthy dependence on Computer-Aided Design (CAD) technologies. This statement seems to connote that such computer technologies are merely a drawing tool. I believe this position is biased and built on a value system connected to traditional techniques of conceptual creation and design development. It was only relatively recently that the computer was introduced simply as a drafting tool, and many practitioners and academics felt it to be slower than traditional drafting techniques and not as effective. But it eventually emerged as an essential component in the culture of architectural practice. In fact, it currently is not feasible or even acceptable to develop certain three-dimensional architectural compositions without totally involving CAD programs in the process (e.g. pendentives and the *muqarnas*). In addition, it has become common to come across architectural students with considerable talent, a sense of imagination, and the ability to generate interesting concepts and design solutions, but who might have limited sketching and manual presentation skills. Moreover, current architectural practice has come to stress the use of computers to the point where architectural firms focus in their search for architects to employ on those who excel in computer graphics and representation. Computer-generated graphics are becoming powerful marketing tools in the architectural industry and architectural graduates need to master the generation of such graphics to effectively compete in the job market.

We nonetheless have to admit that the current prevailing trend of overusing computer graphics in architectural representation is problematic. I do not believe, however, that the solution lies solely in returning to traditional design processes. In fact, I believe it could be the other way around. In other words, the role of CAD technologies could be investigated and explored more thoroughly and deeply, and such technologies could be further integrated into the process of design thinking, rather than being merely utilized for the presentation of design solutions. There are many serious current investigations

addressing the capabilities of computing in decision-making and intelligence within the context of architectural design. The concepts of narrative, plots, actors, agents, and interaction are being introduced as new concepts within newly-emerging trends in digital design thinking. A parallel process should be taking place with regard to CAD technologies.

I therefore propose that encouraging traditional manual skills amongst students of architecture should focus on those who have salient talents in using them and have clear potentials in integrating them in the generation of design ideas and solutions. But in parallel with traditional design tools, we should further encourage the use of computers as exploratory and thinking tools in design education and practice, and in a totally different context than that of traditional ones.

I tend to agree with the jurors that there is a general trend amongst many students to focus on graphics, images, and arbitrary forms, and to ignore function as well as social and cultural contexts. I believe this is a problem architectural academia in Jordan suffers from, and that there is no sincere attempt to overcome it. There is a prevailing myth that function is much more a technical and economic issue rather than a creative dimension of design thinking, and I believe that this (mis)understanding of function is shared amongst many local academicians as well as practitioners. Consequently, the design program usually is reduced to the quantitative exercise of merely generating lists of measured spaces rather than developing a comprehensive diagnostics of activities (physical, mental, and social) within a spatial setting. Function should rather be approached within the context of issues such as life-quality and life-style.

I expect that is why students search in their designs for narratives in images and forms rather than in the research-oriented pre-design thesis required for graduating projects. As such, students eventually find themselves constrained by depending on imported images to tell imported stories, which involve importing vocabularies from differing sources unrelated to the context of the design problem. My assumption is that the jurors' criticism is directed towards importing readily-packaged images rather than towards the use of already developed architectural vocabularies. In fact, it seems acceptable to me to use and further develop such vocabularies, especially those coming out of functional necessities or technical developments in the architectural industry. However, a careful examination of local practice reveals similar symptoms. Importing readily-packaged, unauthentic images into the local environment is commonplace. The same also applies to regenerating images that were previously developed locally regardless of contextual differences. As a result, we in academia need to further help students effectively distinguish between the different - though related - concepts of architectural language, image, design concept, and thesis. At the same time, we need to echo such efforts in local practice by developing the culture of architectural criticism as an essential component within the environment of practice.

Finally, it would be helpful to open up and sustain a dialogue among schools of architecture in Jordan to address these issues and to extend this dialogue to the institutions of local practice.