

So students of architecture spend their time at university very removed from the buildings and behavioural settings they are designing, and doing this largely by reference to designer knowledge rather than ordinary knowledge. It is generally recognized that students' main aim at university is to work out what their tutors want them to do. It is hardly surprising that during this period they pick up a way of thinking about architecture and buildings that can be very remote from the way people actually behave in them.

We can see from this that, as a profession, modern architects tend to follow an extremely high-risk strategy when designing. Collectively they have high regard for formal material in architecture, and often view symbolic material in a different way to those for whom they design. They tend to consider space as an abstract concept and not a behavioural phenomenon, and yet paradoxically assume that behaviour will follow their predictions. Moreover, the contemporary architect has been encouraged to be iconoclastic and inventive. The new and the original are highly valued in architectural circles, and certainly far more so than in most of society. Architects are not trained to observe and evaluate buildings as social phenomena, so they are ill-equipped to gather and learn from readily available data, which would reveal the inaccuracies of their predictions. However, they tend to rely a great deal on looking at previous designs. Often this is done by using static illustrations in books and magazines that may even be devoid of people. Most architectural awards and prizes are judged by other architects, who share the same value systems, thus reinforcing rather than correcting the vicious cycle in which designer and ordinary knowledge become thrown apart.

In short, then, we can see the architect as always trying something new, but having low predictive capability and poorly equipped to learn from mistakes. Little wonder the profession has an increasingly bad press and is less and less highly regarded by the general public! This is a harsh and probably extreme criticism of a profession of which I am a member, and which I believe genuinely tries to do its best – in fact it is a profession that is, in my experience, largely caring and socially minded. Most architects care passionately about making good places for people. It seems a sorry mess that we have got into!

It does not have to be like this. It is possible for architects to get buildings nearer to people's needs than they often do. They can improve their predictive capabilities, and they can learn to connect the real and design worlds in their minds.

One-way prediction

There is a curious paradox in the way architects think about the relationship between people and spaces, which centres on that most over-used aphorism of the twentieth century 'form follows function'. The assumption here is that functions are understood and then form