



Delft University of Technology

A Revolutionary Suggestion Introduction to Elia Zenghelis

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LEARN ING

INSERT
Radical
Pedagogies

Nick Axel
Behemoth Press
Franco Berardi
Peggy Deamer
Leonardo Dellanoce
dpr-barcelona

Fake Industries
Priscila Fernandes
Silvia Franceschini
Reinier de Graaf
Jonathan Hanahan
Frans-Willem Korsten
Ying-Tzu Lin

Timothy Moore
Alessandro Petti
common room
Ben Schouten
Jack Self
Elia Zenghelis

Learning is good, learning is the future! But what should we be learning, and how should we be learning it? Who – and what – are we learning for in the first place? 'Real-life' doesn't start once learning stops: learning has become a condition of life itself. Volume takes a first dive into the mechanics and horizons of learning.

LEARNING

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A REVOLUTIONARY SUGGESTION

Along with creativity, optimism and will, the early 1970's London architecture scene was a moment of ideological conflict between political factions over which direction progress should be oriented. Instead of a victor being declared and a single vector followed, what resulted, at the Architectural Association at least, was an academic framework set up to preserve and even encourage such tendencies for conflict and divergence. Behemoth Press introduces here a text by Elia Zenghelis first published in 1975 that was originally written as a polemical response to a growing movement for unionization; a political form of labor that surely threatens the great productive potentials of competition and precarity.

In 1974, Elia Zenghelis published a project titled *The Egg of Columbus Centre*. The design is the transposition of the squares of Exodus, the project that marked the beginning of the collaboration between Zenghelis and his student Rem Koolhaas, onto Manhattan. Each block contains a metropolitan institution, autonomous social condensers such as the Harbor, the Ceremonial Square, the Park of Aggression, the Institute of Biological Emergencies, etc. A series of collective housing facilities, based on an alchemic mix of constructivist blocks and Manhattan luxury hotels occupies the southern blocks of the complex. The Egg of Columbus dominates center of the composition, establishing the theorem of an 'easy architecture', liberating it from the burdens of social responsibility to which it had been confined. As a corollary and demonstration, the Egg is attached to the School of Architecture, an "incubator of ideologies: an institution 'devoted to the artificial conception ... of theories, interpretations ... constructions, proposals ... and their inflection on the world.'"¹ The school of architecture is then an analogical double of the metropolis, a laboratory in which new institutions are tested in a controlled environment, ready to be exported to the outside world, or to become soon obsolete and superseded.

Zenghelis' School of Architecture was far from being the representation of an ideal school. On the contrary, it is shaped after the concrete model of London's Architectural Association (AA) – as Alvin Boyarsky reformed it and where Zenghelis worked as an influential teacher.

The anti-authoritarian post-1968 legacy brought about a period of crisis for the school and a generalized

refusal for architecture and its disciplinary foundations. The school became thus polarized between the pop, consumeristic ethos of Archigram, the sociological, empirical approach of the urban planning department and the mysticism of former-chairman John Lloyd's teachings. Moreover, the century-long independence of the school was threatened by the plan of the Ministry of Education (at that time, chaired by Margaret Thatcher) to conform all institutions of British higher education into a dual system of universities and polytechnics. In this plan, the anomalous situation of the AA would have been normalized by its merger with the Imperial College.

In the midst of this turmoil, in 1970, Zenghelis and his pupil Rem Koolhaas took the occasion to apply a special clause of the school's original statute, which posited that if the main hall of the school – the "dining room" – was filled up to a certain point, the school community could override the council's decision. Winning over the apathy of the disillusioned student community, Zenghelis and Koolhaas managed to fill the dining room, force the school council to resign and prepare the ground for the democratic election of a new chairman, Alvin Boyarsky, in 1971.²

While John Lloyd introduced the unit system – a series of vertical, autonomous workshops countering the previous horizontal, modernist organization of the school which saw architects as technicians – it was Alvin Boyarsky that pushed the unit system to its extreme consequences.

Conceived as a culinary experiment, the school was structured around a pluralistic *à la carte* series of

design units which each assumed an independent stance or ideology, often in open contrast to the other units. Boyarsky did not shy away from comparing the school to a supermarket, in which any student could help themselves in picking up new ideas and products according to personal needs and desires, and at the same time disposing them when they became obsolete or superseded by new trends.³

Boyarsky also pointed out the cynical and competitive nature of the AA fauna, comparing students and teachers to “predatory creatures.”⁴ The merit of Boyarsky was to consolidate the position of the school by avoiding its institutionalization within the public system of education, by strengthening and updating its peculiarities and idiosyncrasies that had characterized the ethos of the school since its beginning.

The school was originally founded in 1847 by a group of young students who started opposing the pupilage system through which architects were educated at that time. In fact, at that time Britain lacked a public institution like the French *École des Beaux Arts*, and architects were educated through ‘internships’ within private architectural offices. Founding members thus established the Architectural Association as an independent network of self-help and self-education, against the privileges of the established professional networks.⁵

Boyarsky saw the AA more as a gentlemen’s club than a school. “It’s just a chandelier – which is an eighteenth century chandelier – an eighteenth century marble fireplace, with nice windows overlooking a green London square. And a bar which sells whiskey and wine [and that has] lots of comfortable chairs. And students get their crits in the bar or under the chandelier. It’s like downtown. You come to meet people to talk.”⁶ He also praised the amateurish approach of teaching and the lack of school facilities as a strength, not as a weakness: “there’s no place, there’s no money, and nobody’s there for very long periods of time.”⁷ But such a system also attracted also some discontent.

In particular, dissent came from the most politically active people that gravitated around the urban planning department, and some in particular around the influential figure of Brian Anson and his Architects Revolutionary Council. As Robin Evans noted, in 1975 there were still several units dealing with architecture’s social relevance.⁸ Boyarsky did not like the anti-formalist stance of these units, which he opposed through authoritarian means.

The confrontation between Boyarsky and the leftist groups summoned between May and June 1975, when some of the teachers attempted to establish a section of the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS) union. On May 6th the decision of staging “unannounced day strikes with picket lines” was taken, demanding salaries in line with the British standards, pension, and tenured positions for teachers.⁹

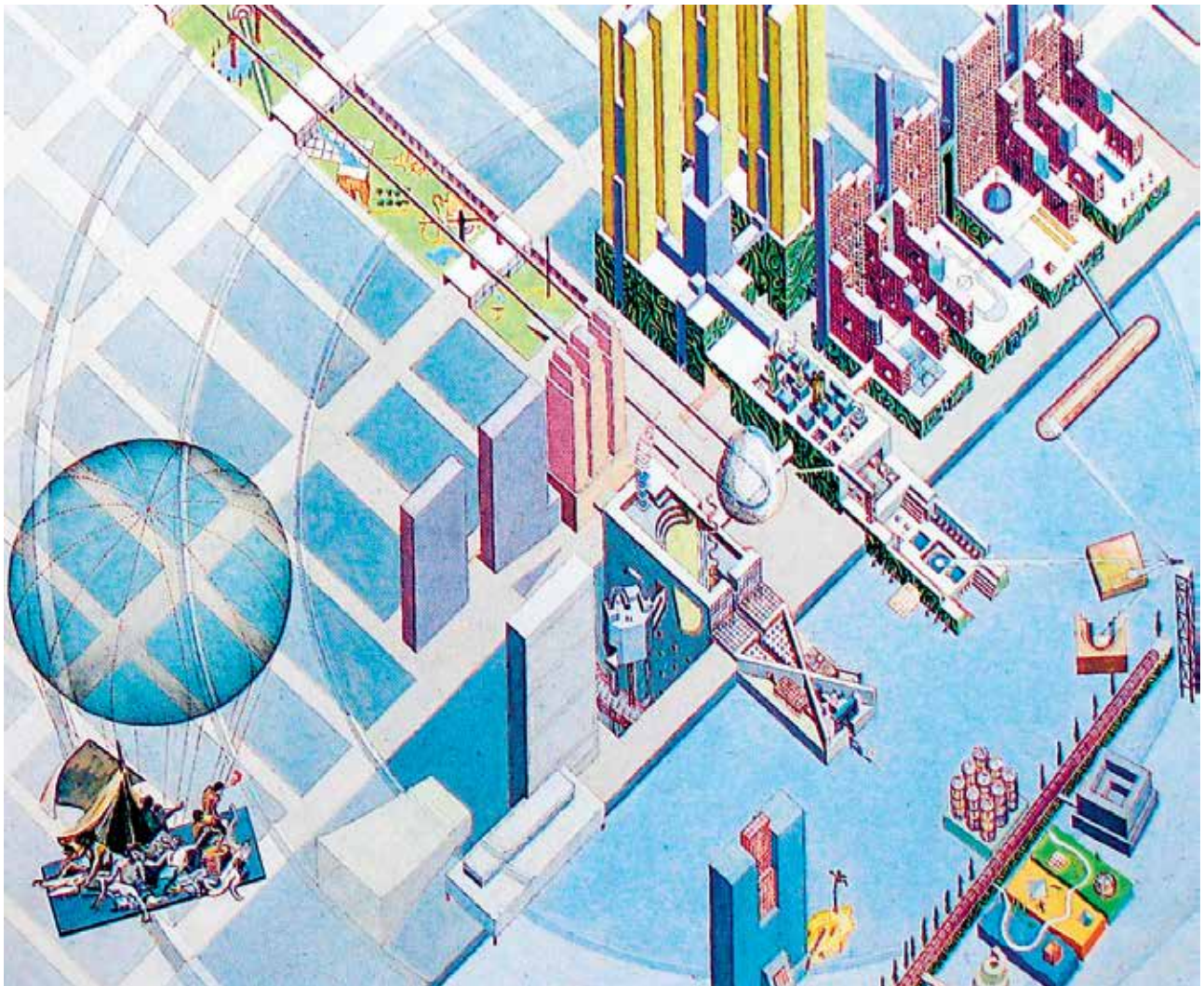
Ghost Dance Times, an independent initiative weekly paper edited by Martin Pawley and published by the AA since October 1974, supported the position of the strikers. In the editorial of the issue of May 9th titled ‘Stop this nonsense now’ Pawley expresses concerns for the elitist approach to teaching of the school: “training student architects for private practice is a farce when more than eighty percent of graduates are in fact salaried designers and administrators working for public or private conglomerates. AA teaching traditions (if such there be) are founded upon an inspired amateurism less and less in

tune with the spirit of the age.”¹⁰ And again, in the next issue: “under present economic conditions AA employees, like employees everywhere, must be able to negotiate pay and conditions of work in an organized and realistic manner, free from secrecy and Byzantine intrigue. Second because [The] behavior of the AA council in rejecting its own working party report on union recognition once again proves that this amateurish clique is in no way qualified to deal with the urgent and real problems faced by the school.”¹¹ The amateurism of the school’s organization, which Boyarsky considered the cipher of the school’s success, induced in many others a sense of frustration and impotence towards ‘the real’: “enthusiasts for the in-house pyjama bag ‘union’ fear ASTMS recognition for precisely the same reason as they fear all invasions of reality into their fanciful conception of the methods and purposes of architectural education.”¹²

Pawley’s position – which eventually led to the shut down of the publication by Boyarsky – was opposed by many teachers including Peter Cook,¹³ Rem Koolhaas and Zenghelis himself. Through his pungently polemic style, Koolhaas praised the necessity for an institution structured like the AA, which provided an “essential conceptual counterweight and refugee camp for the cream of the misfits from all over the World.”¹⁴

Zenghelis, who had previously spent warm words praising the work of the ‘ghost dancer’ Pawley,¹⁵ replied with a paradoxical proposal. Instead of securing the right to tenure for professor, his was to give them (and to all the other members of the community, including the students) the possibility to fire teachers. In this way, the school could have worked as a commune modeled after the Athenian democracy, in which the community has the power to gather and expel its members.¹⁶

- 1 Elia Zenghelis, ‘The Egg of Columbus Center’, *Architectural Design*, Vol. 47, No. 5, 1977.
- 2 Cynthia Davidson, ‘A Conversation with Elia Zenghelis’, *Log* 30, 2014.
- 3 Irene Sunwoo, ‘From the “Well-Laid Table” to the “Market Place:” The Architectural Association Unit System’, *Journal of Architecture Education*, Vol. 65, No. 2, 2012.
- 4 Ibid., Sunwoo, pp. 30.
- 5 Edward Bottoms, *Abridged version of an introductory lecture to Archives For London & the Twentieth Century Society*, 2010. At: www.aaschool.ac.uk/AASCHOOL/LIBRARY/aahistory.php (accessed August 11, 2015.)
- 6 Ibid., Sunwoo, pp. 33.
- 7 Ibid., Sunwoo, pp. 33.
- 8 Robin Evans, ‘1975–1980: Projects from Axes to Violins’, *AA Files*, No. 1, 1981–82.
- 9 Martin Pawley, ‘Stop This Nonsense Now’, *Ghost Dance Times*, May 9, 1975.
- 10 Ibid., Pawley, ‘Stop this Nonsense Now’, 1975.
- 11 Martin Pawley, ‘On the Defensive’, *Ghost Dance Times*, May 16, 1975.
- 12 Martin Pawley, ‘No Time for Toytown’, *Ghost Dance Times*, May 23, 1975.
- 13 Peter Cook, ‘Open Letter from Peter Cook’, *Ghost Dance Times*, May 16, 1975.
- 14 Rem Koolhaas, ‘The Final Blow’, *Ghost Dance Times*, June 20, 1975.
- 15 Elia Zenghelis, ‘So There’, *Ghost Dance Times*, November 1, 1974.
- 16 Elia Zenghelis, ‘A Revolutionary Suggestion’, *Ghost Dance Times*, June 6, 1975.



The Egg of Columbus Centre, Elia Zhengelís (1974)

Ghost Dance Times

Friday 20th June, 1975

Letters to the Editor

A REVOLUTIONARY SUGGESTION

from Mr. Elia Zenghelis

Sir, At a time when you and everyone in the School seems to be immersed in a desperate search for sanity it is amazing that no voice has been heard to point out the obvious: that what the School needs, is *increased facilities for firing academic staff* and that the crude system in existence, which merely consists of not renewing expiring contracts ought to be further developed into a real, sophisticated and effective mechanism.

Here are some modest suggestions for *resolving this urgent problem* overlooked for too long: a procedure of ostracism ought to be instituted for every member in the academic staff at once. The right to fire and replace *teachers* ought to be bestowed to every member of the School. Not only students should have it but also you and the Chairman. Everyone supposedly belonging to the *School Community* should be entitled to bring forward at any time any name he or she wishes to *fire*. An *appeal for firing* should be lodged immediately to an *ad hoc* tribunal with powers to deliberate the case and reach a summary decision within a week of the appeal. Eligibility to sit on this tribunal should lie exclusively with all those privileged to have been subjected to the academic activities of the person accused, regardless of how small or large that body is. Their verdict should be final and there should be no appeal. There is no need to explain the obvious logic of this proposal. It is derived from Dick Hobin's ideal model of a school which only he can explain with overwhelming conviction. The only thing that needs pointing out is that to make it possible, the present efforts to deny the Chairman this healthy practice should be replaced by a zealous campaign in favor of strengthening it and giving it to all.

I understand that the resourceful '*School Community*' has at last been invited to make its chilling presence felt after four refreshing years of satisfying sleep. If on the ominous date, Tuesday the Tenth of June, the comforting reappearance of this body of collective strength manages to increase its number from ten to 400, I humbly suggest that apart from deliberating currently overlooked issues (such as the adverse theory that the standards of the School have been deteriorating in the last four years, or the corresponding – and bewildering – fact that its international reputation in the student world has during the same period risen by means of inexplicable quantum

jumps etc.) it should also concern itself with the burning question that in this controversial era that the School was deprived of the legitimate pageant of *academic dismissals*. In its deliberations it would be worth its while to consider the appointment of yet another working party to look into this pressing matter and formulate a "*Draft procedural agreement for increased facilities in academic dismissals*". Should such a mechanism be instituted the effects would be so overwhelming that it could even become a pleasure to be the first victim.

For reasons of common sense therefore, even the most imperceptible move (however distant its effects) that would tend to endanger the stability of the academic staff's current *insecurity of tenure* (a ploy that students could still be exploiting if they had become interested) is insanity. As you once whispered in my ear in the intoxicating comfort of a sumptuous Soho restaurant, it is also amateurish suicide and a mockery of the principles of justice appealed to by all those whose hearts are gladdened by the recognition of the AA/ASTMS union. It is true that all Council decisions are customarily insane. They have always been because of the nature of this body. They still are. And it would be invaluable if with your usual wisdom you could in these critical times outline your concept of this '*Reality*' that you recently invoked with such eloquence and religious obstinacy. The answer to your question might be the salvation we are all waiting for. It will supersede all our arguments and suspend all our agonies. You merciless sphinx give us a clue to your enigma: which is the influential institution that our present social system can sustain, what would it offer us, by what miraculous achievement would it become the center of our new orbit? Do not leave our impoverished imaginations to fill the sacred gap of propositions having such irresistible seductiveness! And please do not indulge in the pleasures of acting like your myriad fans, those victims of automatism who have abandoned their right to think in order to recite better.

Only speak and we shall understand.

The Ghost Dancer will endeavour to respond to this heartfelt request in the few editorials remaining to him.