

May 1, 1991

To: Graduate Students in the Department of
Architecture

From: Christopher Alexander
Professor of Architecture

Re: Professor Kostof's Open Letter

Obviously Professor Kostof and I disagree deeply about many issues. In particular, we disagree profoundly about ideas in the realm of architecture.

In his open letter to you, Professor Kostof has fundamentally misrepresented the real issue which lies between us: namely that he, Professor Treib, Professor Brown, Dean Montgomery, and a few others, have actively sought to contain and control the substance taught in this Department, and in particular, to prevent me from teaching the wide-ranging material which is now available in The Building Process Area of Emphasis.

I have had disputes with the Department for one reason and one reason only. For many years, I have taught a point of view about architecture which throws into question many of the prevailing points of view in what one might call "mainstream theory" about architecture. This changed point of view which my colleagues and I have introduced, has been very widely published, in many books and manuscripts available in the library, and in building projects in this country and in other countries.

All these books, papers, projects and buildings, look at architecture in an entirely different way from the prevailing way. It is an architecture, and a way of doing architecture, which is more deeply rooted in the real making of things. This way starts, for example, with the assumption that harmony is a real thing, not an arbitrary opinion or matter of taste. The theory sets out to describe this type of harmony, in detailed structural terms. It makes it clear how this deep structure exists in various forms and different cultures.

It invites participation of users in building projects, by specific and well thought out procedures. This new way of thinking views the actual construction of buildings as inseparable from the design: and therefore challenges architects who want to keep the two things separate. As far as teaching is concerned, this makes it necessary to experience real construction, and to understand how the design process continues throughout the building process.

This theory is a complete theory about how to think about the environment and life, in relation to one another. It deals with the very different modes and scales of architecture, dealing with the smallest things, and the largest communities, in a single sweep; it includes design and construction; and it allows a student to build up a picture from the smallest detail to the largest building; and to build up such a picture so that the student can *do* it -- can carry it out in real life -- in the classroom, in the studio, in the workshop, and even on site. The theory is profound; and it is useful as a basis for almost any kind of work in architecture -- whether it is professional architecture as it is today, or a renewed kind of architecture, or some other kind of life which deals with the environment in other ways.

The teaching of this new theory leads to and raises fundamental doubts about the prevailing architectural establishment. And, because of this, Professors Kostof, Treib, Montgomery and others, have fought vigorously, for more than a decade, to prevent this material from being taught in our Department.

The reason that The Building Process Area of Emphasis exists at all, is because I have fought for it for many years, striving against great resistance to find a way of introducing this new material into our Departmental curriculum, and to protect it, in the curriculum, as a permanent and legitimate part of study, on an equal footing with other areas of emphasis.

Many faculty members have helped me in this fight, and have helped by their votes, by discussion, by committee work, and so on, to ensure that these new ideas can be included in the curriculum, and can be made available to all of you.

And above all, the powerful Privilege and Tenure Committee of the University of California has also helped, by establishing a firm agreement *according to which The Building Process Area of Emphasis will exist, on an equal footing with the other areas of emphasis in our Department.*

However, there is still a small core -- no more than about half a dozen people -- who are *still* working to try and get rid of this material, even though it has been introduced into the curriculum formally, and made part of the Department.

Just now, at the eleventh hour -- as so often before -- efforts have recently been made *again* to destroy the Building Process Area. Assistant Professor Neis (designate), appointed one year ago as an Assistant Professor to teach in the area, has not yet been confirmed. Why? Because Dean Montgomery and others have made representations, behind the scenes, which have cast doubt on the confirmation process. They have used entirely fallacious issues of affirmative action to make it appear that there was something wrong with the appointment process -- when actually it is Professor Neis' intellectual stance that they are trying to undermine.

During the last months, the construction classes Arch 263A and 263B have been struck off the list of courses. The re-establishment of these two courses, crucial to The Building Process Area, has been impeded by a two year long struggle with Professor Brown and Treib, who have interposed every procedural roadblock imaginable to prevent these two courses from being offered. Twenty-three of you have signed up to take these classes in the Fall. But because of Professor Brown's and Professor Treib's activities, these courses do not exist. We shall still give them, under other course numbers. But the administrative authorities within the Department are making it as hard as they can.

Most recently, a report (dated April 5) published by Professor Treib's curriculum committee proposes a graduate curriculum that would all but kill The Building Process Area forever -- because it would set up a pattern of requirements in which this material

could no longer be effectively taught, and in which The Building Process Area would not be on an equal footing with the other Areas of Emphasis.

The efforts Professor Kostof and others have made along the way to refuse admission to students who express an interest in this kind of work, and the efforts they are making now to bring faculty to the Department to swell the ranks of those who will continue to oppose these theories, represent deep and serious divisions of intellectual opinion about the *nature* of architecture.

If The Building Process Area is damaged, then the graduate students in this school will have one less opportunity to study a type of theory, a type of architecture, a type of design and planning, which has potential to make an enormous change in this country, and in the world.

Most of the faculty have embraced the need for this new material. But a few faculty remain for whom these ideas seem genuinely frightening, or threatening.

Why are certain faculty members afraid of the courses within The Building Process Area of Emphasis? Why not let the classes be taught, on an equal footing with other areas of emphasis, and without imposing slyly constructed constraints designed to discourage participation? Within the new curriculum proposed by the curriculum committee, the graduate students would be given a list of departmental requirements that would make it all but impossible to study effectively within this Area of Emphasis. In short, the curriculum committee is now proposing an entirely new set of rules which, in practical terms, would have the effect of eliminating The Building Process Area of Emphasis entirely from the course of study offered within our Department.

My position is simple. Let the students have exposure to the material. Give graduate students the opportunity to take these classes without having their freedom blocked by subtle factors, or by intimidation -- and without administrative opposition or power politics or admissions policies calculated to destroy your intellectual opportunities. *Then* let us see what happens. If the students want to go on taking the

material, then let us continue the material. If, on the other hand, after a few years in which graduate students genuinely have the opportunity to study these new ideas, the classes dwindle, and the need is no longer expressed by students -- why then, of course, the faculty would have to re-evaluate the usefulness of the course work.

My experience is that students learn a tremendous amount when exposed to this material. Some students feel it is the first time in their careers they have genuinely experienced a love of building, color, making models, drawing, history, philosophy, construction, the connection with traditional art which lies at the root of many cultures, the experience of genuine spirituality in the art of building. Above all, these students learn what it is to *make* a building: and learn to *feel* it in their bones.

The usefulness of The Building Process Area stands or falls on the contribution it makes to student life. I ask all of you to help support this material and its continued existence in the school -- and to work to make sure that it stays in the curriculum, in a form that is not subtly undercut by contradictory requirements; that is not hampered by behind-the-scenes undercutting of faculty appointments; and not undercut by drastic and unfair cancellation of classes like 263A/B.

Please help me and the future of the school. From my experience, the opportunity for genuine open dialogue of an intellectual nature will not come easily or without struggle. It will only come about when the school has an atmosphere -- and rules -- which make sure that students really can experience these new ideas in a practical fashion, and for as long as it takes to learn the ideas thoroughly. That is why The Building Process Area of Emphasis was created.

I believe students should be able to experience The Building Process Area material. I also believe that they should experience other important areas of knowledge which are suppressed or reduced in emphasis right now -- for example: (1) Ecology as a way of thinking about buildings (2) Architecture which comes from the feelings and opinions of cultural minorities (3) Empirical study of human behavior

taught as a basis for *design*, not merely as an academic discipline and (4) Design taught from the point of view of structural engineering.

I very strongly urge all students to come to the next faculty-student forum on Monday May 6, in room 112, 3-6 pm, when these matters will, no doubt, be discussed. I also urge that you come to the faculty meeting of Wednesday May 8 at 6 pm, when new appointments will be discussed. Further, I urge you to attend all future faculty meetings, as is your right. In spite of Professor Kostof's eloquent portrayal of himself as a populist, it is a fact that at the faculty meeting of April 12, he (and Professor Treib) opposed the inclusion of the student-proposed candidates Weber, Findley and Ubbelohde in the short list of candidates to be interviewed.

I am concerned that unless you are present to watch these activities for yourselves, and unless your voices are heard, the forces which are aligned against me, and against you, armed with their positions of power, prestige and influence, will work behind closed doors to strip all meaning, content and viability from a course of study that has a vital role to play in the world of architecture and in our collective dream of improving the human condition.