

A N O P E N L E T T E R

To: All Graduate Students

From: Spiro Kostof

26 April 1991

By now most of you have read, or know of, a memorandum by Professor Christopher Alexander, dated 23 April, addressed to the faculty, administrators, and staff of the Department but also made accessible to students. It is entitled "Intentional Narrowing of Focus or A Program of Diversity."

This document is a pernicious, libellous piece of fiction. It is outrageous, but you won't find much public outrage among the faculty and staff because we are quite used to these missives from Professor Alexander. They come at regular intervals and try to defame, with varying degrees of viciousness, now this, now that group of faculty. We have become inured to his bullying ways by which he tries to bypass or thwart established procedures of academic governance and the processes of democracy. We now mostly ignore these attacks, because they are often beneath response, and because we would much rather do our work as faculty members - teach, carry on our research, monitor the welfare of our enterprise - than play the memo wars so dear to Professor Alexander.

This is the reason I am addressing this letter to you, our students, the innocent party in these infamous bickerings. You should be outraged. This poisonous document is an insult to your intelligence. It asks you to believe that the school has become an educational "police state", that there is widespread "thought control", and other such fabrications fit to describe Byelorussia perhaps, but not Berkeley.

I leave aside all the venom that is sent my way. I will not insult you further by suggesting that any of you would credit allegations that I am about to take over the Department - some sort of subtle coup, apparently, whose object it is "the



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narrowing of vision" -; that people tremble in and out of my presence; that junior faculty members feel threatened by me ("I do not know if Professor Kostof actually threatened anyone") - and so on sickeningly.

Two subjects, however, I do need to address because they concern you directly. One is the allegation that I have said "explicitly ... that [I] don't want students to have a voice in Departmental affairs." This is of course a lie: I have said no such thing explicitly or otherwise. But it would be too much to expect of this fevered piece of demagoguery that a date would be given, and the occasion and context of the statement specified.

It is actually possible to attach the perverted course of this allegation to an event. I have recently expressed my displeasure at my own Faculty Search Committee for the schedule it adopted to involve student participation - a schedule which required a second review after a final list had been reached. My displeasure was not in any way intended to address the issue of student involvement, but the timing of the Committee (and I must share in the guilt) which produced separate, rather than coordinated consultations between faculty members and students. In hindsight, Committee Chair Arens was justified to reopen the review, since not to do so would indeed have amounted to excluding student opinion. I was wrong to be preoccupied so officiously with the integrity of our procedures and processes, and not see the more urgent need to bend for a transcendent reason.

I have been in this Department for twenty-five years. I have lived through the struggles of students to place representatives on all Committees, both Departmental and University-wide. I witnessed their final triumph, the appointment of a student Regent. It would be criminal now to think of turning back: the loss to all of us - of counsel, and shared community - would simply be too great. Professor Alexander, who spends very little time in Wurster and almost none on any of our committees, has no right to claim knowledge of the degree to which students contribute to the steering and enhancement of our affairs. This contricution is substantial and critical to our well-being. What possible motive, I keep asking myself, can Professor Alexander have, in attempting so grossly and wilfully to drive a wedge between students and faculty?

The second subject concerns Professor Alexander's description of the present state of our Department. This is a private vision of



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conspiracies and terror, here and there obscenely relieved by mawkish references to "a better world", his own sadness at what is going on, etc.

The Department is having its share of problems currently - the 200 affair, the obdurate budget that is perhaps the single most frightening threat to the quality of our education, the faculty search which is not without its tensions. But this is all resolvable. Fundamentally we are strong: I believe with all conviction that we are still the best architecture school in the country. The mantle of diversity which Professor Alexander seeks now to appropriate for his private designs has been the banner of this school since the Sixties. In my first years here we had on the faculty sociologists and globalists, systems analysts and historians, three ladder-rank Black professors (of whom one is still with us and one has been elevated to a chancellorship), and several women professors (Evenson, Lindheim, Cranz, Claire Cooper). Some of these statistics have changed since, and we are still sadly inadequate in Asian and Hispanic representation on the faculty. The search, and "exop" appointments, may start to remedy some of this.

But our student body has become ever more diverse, and our sense that we must recognize this diversity in our teaching has improved. Speaking only of history, we offer courses on Japanese architecture, on Islam and related cultures through the full-time commitment to the Third World of our colleague Nezar Alsayyad; Jean-Paul Bourdier is our farflung observer in Black Africa; Professors Tobriner and Protzen seriously investigate in courses the Pre-Columbian and Colonial environment of both Meso- and South America; and the general survey which you all take now is as likely to dwell on Angkor Wat and Isfahan as it is on Chartres or Versailles.

Diversity, like all aspects of educational excellence, needs vigilance, conviction, improvement. What it does not need is the random, self-serving perorations of Professor Alexander whose idea of diversity seems to boil down to having his courses added to the list of Departmental requirements.

Please come and say hello. Stop by singly or in small groups or write. I am around much of the week and regularly during office hours on Tuesday afternoons. Hundreds of you have access to me in my courses every semester. Ask the Dean to address you publicly



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about his perception of the state of the College and its future. It is his responsibility, when our enterprise is so maliciously attacked from within, to stand up for our dignity and welfare. Organize a student forum, on your own or with the help of the Chair, and invite the faculty to attend and inform. Prove to your own satisfaction that, contrary to the breathless italics of the Alexander memo ("these things are true - but we can't talk about them"), there is nothing of a professional, academic or human nature that cannot be openly discussed in Wurster. We must keep in touch, all of us at all times. Only then we will be rid, once and for all, of the scurrilous, wanton rumors gathered from anonymous, faceless, corridor informants.

In reading the Alexander memo one final time, I am reminded of two famous historic outcries against excess. One is Cicero's cry against the traitor Catiline: Quo usque tandem abutere Catilinam patientia nostra! (How long will you abuse our patience, O Catiline.) The other of course is Joseph Welch, the great counsel in the MacCarthy hearings who, revolted by months of character assassination by the Accuser and his thugs, burst out on television one day, "Have you no shame, Sir? Have you finally no shame?"

Many thanks for your forbearance.

*Spiro Kostof*

Spiro Kostof  
Professor of Architectural History