

Demystifying the SCI-Arc Design Studio: 1972-1976

Benjamin J Smith

Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan

From its inception SCI-Arc projected an outsider mentality compared to other models of architectural education. Its democratic pedagogical structure was comparable to other democratic educational models that existed, such as Summerhill in nearby Suffolk. Within four years of its founding, however, SCI-Arc was accredited by the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB). This paper explores events in SCI-Arc's history leading to its accreditation. This is critical for two reasons: 1) to understand and map the history of SCI-Arc's design pedagogy from its founding in 1972 to its accreditation in 1976, and 2) to understand the disciplinary climate of architecture during the mid 1970s that viewed the SCI-Arc curriculum as meeting the educational standards of a licensed architect. The ambition of this research is to construct a historical narrative and analyze the stakes and affirmations of the work done by SCI-Arc faculty and students during this time. It will make use of a number of primary sources, including personal interviews, e-mail correspondence, the Getty Research Institute Archive, the SCI-Arc Media Archive, and articles from the Los Angeles Times.

The myth surrounding the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) is that it is a school born out of rebellion to the mainstream, a fringe institution that has always been resistant to the status quo. SCI-Arc was founded in 1972 by Ray Kappe and officially opened on October 2, less than six months after Kappe was fired from his position as chair of the architecture department at California State Polytechnic University Pomona (Cal Poly). When Kappe left Cal Poly, six other faculty joined him, including Shelly Kappe, Ahde Lahti, Thom Mayne, Bill Simonian, Glenn Small, and James Stafford. They became the core SCI-Arc faculty in the 1970s. Kappe's pedagogical ambition was a principle of self-direction, a characteristic

intended for both students and faculty. The intent was that motivated designers would channel curiosity and creative energy into their work. The instructors at SCI-Arc were considered advanced learners. Initially, formal evaluations and grades were not issued and there was not a rubric for passing and failing. If a student did not meet expectations they were encouraged to re-work their projects until deemed satisfactory, or begin an alternative proposal with new direction from the instructor.

Kappe was fired from Cal Poly on April 14, 1972 after a disagreement with the Dean of the College of Environmental Design, William Dale. Cal Poly President Robert Kramer's position was documented in an April 26, 1972 LA Times article that stated, Kramer "removed Kappe because the architect was not on campus every day, because he changed the architecture curriculum 'without the appropriate approvals,' because he switched class hours without permission and for other violations of 'administrative policies and procedures.'"i According to a recent correspondence with Kappe, he stated that he "established both the curriculum [and] schedule and hired all of the faculty. [They] lived within the prescribed curriculum but were also doing experimental projects."ii Although Kappe was to be removed as chair, he could maintain a tenured faculty position at Cal Poly. Students and faculty of the architecture department felt differently than the administration and formed an official student-faculty fact-finding committee regarding his demotion. The committee's report stated that "there was no substance to the charges against Kappe and that Kramer was 'unjustified' in dismissing him. . . and said he had 'the unanimous support of his faculty and the near unanimous support of students in his department.'"iii

As things soured at Cal Poly, Kappe, along with a group of faculty and a number of students began informal meetings during the spring semester in 1972. They would meet outside of the architecture school at the experimental rhombic dodecahedron structure that was built on campus by freshman architecture students. According to a discussion with Kappe, after several meetings it was suggested that the group should start their own school.^{iv} In an interview with Thom Mayne, principal of Morphosis Architects, he remembered that "it was definitely Ray's idea. . . . I remember he

brought us up to his house and we talked about it and he [said], 'let's start our own school.' And I [said], 'OK.' I look back now and it was beautifully naive."^v Mayne went on to recall that the initial ambitions were vague, except that the school was meant to be experimental, diverse, and minimally administered.^{vi} It was estimated by Kappe that 150 of the 350 students at Cal Poly would leave with them to start SCI-Arc. By the middle of the summer in 1972 only 50 students had officially enrolled. A group of these students travelled around California to announce the beginning of a new architecture school. These efforts convinced 25 additional students from the United States and Canada to join them. The inaugural class began with 75 students.^{vii}

In the summer of 1972 SCI-Arc leased its first building in an industrial neighborhood in Santa Monica, California. Initially, there were multiple strategies of education being offered. These included a more structured curriculum that comprised different studio and seminar options. It was also possible for students to structure his/her academic schedule on their own, with advisement from a mentor. The SCI-Arc philosophy, as stated in the 1973-74 school catalog, offered "the opportunity for individualized instruction and guidance and a maximum degree of flexibility to respond to the continually changing need within the school environment."^{viii} The inherent freedom in the SCI-Arc curriculum allowed students to take multiple studio courses during the same semester. For example, one studio would focus on more traditional architectural issues and the other on planning and urban design issues. This was something Kappe had experienced and enjoyed when he was a student at Berkeley in the 1940s. Although this was offered, students rarely took on this kind of schedule and the option was eventually dropped.^{ix}

The first design project for the school was an adaptive reuse project of the building that they moved into. Faculty and students worked together to retrofit the existing structure to accommodate studio spaces, seminar rooms, and a large open space for all school meetings. This is not dissimilar from my first week at SCI-Arc. I was a graduate student there from 2004 to 2007. In my first week at the downtown campus, each incoming studio began a project with their classmates, directed by an advanced graduate student to help with a building project or an addition for the school. Two projects in fall 2004

were fabricating desks for all of the incoming students or constructing a platform adjacent to the metal shop, extending the workspace for students and faculty. The value in an exercise like this is the bond that can develop between classmates meeting each other through shared work and also the bond students develop with their school's physical character.

In 1972, students and faculty developed two studio spaces. One was the rhombic dodecahedron structure, also called, Community '72, that had been started at Cal Poly by Glenn Small and was transported to SCI-Arc's Santa Monica campus where it was completed as a school activity. The first SCI-Arc application announced that this project was "the opportunity to live in prefabricated stacking modules and study the behavioral, social, and political patterns."^x Another studio space was proposed and developed by Thom Mayne and Ray Kappe with advanced students Dean Nota and John Souza—a cubicle system that incorporated drafting tables, lighting, and graphics. Due to the school being funded by tuition, which was \$500 per semester, each student paid an additional \$50 for the materials to construct and own their studio space inside the school. Kappe's idea to implement student ownership of the studio space was meant to foster greater care for the school's spaces, offer a lesson in the economics of owning and selling, and contribute to a students' understanding of making things.^{xi} Eventually this system created a problem due to incoming students feeling that spaces were being inflated beyond their value. The school bought back the spaces and distributed them equitably among the students.^{xii}

A freshman studio project from 1974, *Urban Odyssey*, taught by Ahde Lahti and Glenn Small, received coverage from the LA Times, and multiple local television stations in Los Angeles. *Urban Odyssey* was an experimental studio for SCI-Arc students to design and build tent structures that were transported by bicycle throughout Los Angeles and used for urban camping. The students slept in their tents for one week, which, when assembled, could be connected together in a network. The ambitions of the studio were to reduce the consumption of fossil fuels and to discover new ways to engage with the city. One of the greatest challenges the students faced was acquiring the necessary permits or agreements from city officials to use urban fabric in this way.

The anchor of KCAL-TV's, *The Morning Show*, interviewed SCI-Arc faculty member, Ahde Lahti about the project, asking him, "What do you hope to accomplish [with] your first year architectural students? Do you hope to make them more sensitive to their environments, or what is your hope?" [Ahde replied] that was the main idea, because when the student first comes in all he wants to do is become an architect, he wants to build houses and we've been trying to get them to realize what they are doing to the landscape, what they are doing to their own environments, and what they are doing to their own enclosures. . . . We didn't want them to build a "house," right from the beginning. So, this was just a way to experience and not commit yourself to designing, let's say, real houses, right away.^{xiii}

This project excited SCI-Arc students. Freshman student Bambi Moise recalled on *The Morning Show* that students helped complete the projects as deadlines for the excursion neared.^{xiv} Students would also visit classmates and camp with them at their sites that included Equitable Plaza and the back lot of KABC-TV's, A.M. Los Angeles. A.M. Los Angeles interviewed Glenn Small and several students on April 4, 1974. Other coverage of the *Urban Odyssey* included Glenn Small's interview by Dick Garton on KTLA-TV's, *Evening News*. Small explained to Garton, "We are trying to get the students involved in exploring the city in a new way. . . exploring the buildings as they ride by and then setting up [their tents] in a very urban area and visiting all of the things around that area."^{xv}

SCI-Arc's catalog described the school as an "institution in process."^{xvi} This quality asserts that there is value in discovery and experimentation and within the processes of work, rather than having an a priori solution to something. This malleability within the SCI-Arc pedagogy was intended to provide effective teaching methods to develop an architect's creativity, intuition, and design purpose, what Kappe called "the freedom to become."^{xvii} Kappe felt that the attribute of an institution in process was important to maintain throughout his directorship. He believed that this gave SCI-ARC a unique identity within architectural culture—one that he continues to find important for SCI-Arc today.^{xviii}

SCI-Arc had a goal that students and faculty shared responsibilities in fostering the quality of the academic community. This quality of

community became as much a design issue as issues that occurred in the school's studios. In 1975 an all school meeting was held in regard to the formation of a student organization that would disseminate school information and attend faculty meetings. SCI-Arc student, Jerry Compton, who was the student member of the AIA, led the meeting.

Some faculty felt that students should not be allowed to attend all of the faculty meetings due to the sensitive nature of some of the conversations, which dealt with problems of some of the students. Student, Arnie Stalk, did not disagree with that point of view but contested that when there are changes in classes, seminars, design hours, and tuition fees students need to be part of that decision making process. Stalk stated, "if the student body, let's say there [are] 200 people, and there is a designated faculty and an administration, and the administration is raising issues and the students have no feedback, no response to those issues at all, or have no feelings, and these things are just passed along with the thought that 'well, they know what they're doing, we'll let them do it.' I just think that is a really poor situation."^{xix}

Bill Simonian and Ray Kappe countered this point by asserting the values of mutual trust and raised concern regarding the seeming paranoia, respectively. Another member of the meeting described that what was clear to him was that the social structure of the SCI-Arc community needed to be designed. This design included aspects of control. He went on to say, "if it's done well, soundly, then it will solve a whole lot of problems, and if it isn't, then it's going to create a whole lot of problems. The time has to be taken to do that, and interestingly [it] is a very important part of our project, a design project for the school and very related to accreditation, because it has to do with the individual's relation to the community. If we can't get our community together then we can't relate to the outside community. So, I think we should take the time to do that."^{xx}

The meeting appeared difficult. It raised the issue of autonomy and freedom while still being accountable to the character of a group. The struggle was how to accommodate the unique personalities of individuals, allowing them to flourish, and still offer a productive learning environment that could make decisions and

move forward as an institution. The atmosphere suggested a lesson that echoed the school philosophies, which posited SCI-Arc as an environment of self-study and self-evaluation founded on the principle of flexibility.^{xxi}

One way SCI-Arc was moving forward was through accreditation. To become a licensed architect in the United States it is almost always the case that an architect must receive a professional education from a school that is accredited by NAAB. SCI-Arc began the accreditation process in 1975. As stated on the NAAB website, "NAAB is the sole agency authorized to accredit US professional degree programs in architecture."^{xxii} NAAB was founded in 1940 through a joint venture between the American Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), the American Institute of Architects (AIA), and the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) to help school's develop individualized curriculums that sought to meet the specific needs of the schools.^{xxiii}

In 1940, the founding mission of NAAB was: "The . . . societies creating this accrediting board, here record their intent not to create conditions, nor to have conditions created, that will tend toward standardization of educational philosophies or practices, but rather to create and maintain conditions that will encourage the development of practices suited to the conditions which are special to the individual school. The accrediting board must be guided by this intent."^{xxiv} Today this process has become more formal. In 2004, NAAB outlined "Thirteen Conditions of Accreditation," which included wide ranging topics that included program response to the NAAB perspectives, studio culture, human, physical, information and financial resources, administrative and curriculum structures, and student performance criteria.^{xxv}

Ray Kappe opened a conversation on the subject of accreditation at SCI-Arc in the fall of 1975 to discuss this process with students and faculty. Kappe stated that what NAAB had given the school to consider was an "ultimate education development and plan, which states where you are, where you intend to go and how, and do you have the resources to do it."^{xxvi} Most students and faculty felt that becoming accredited was the proper direction for the school to take, however SCI-Arc faculty member, Terry Glassman, offered his opinion that the school needed to evaluate how well

accreditation fit with the ambitions of SCI-Arc. Glassman was not convinced that "the ultimate goal is to get accredited. . . . It seems to me that there are some other issues that may preclude the notion of our fitting in to some of the parameters of being accredited that may override the importance of getting accredited at this point. I think we should look at it after we have more or less defined what we want to be, what our program should be, how are we going to satisfy our needs and goals as a group."^{xxvii}

The issue that Glassman raised is important relative to some of the initial tenets of the school. The inception of SCI-Arc, only three years prior to this meeting, was to get out from underneath bureaucratic structures that seemed to get in the way of experimental and creative architectural practices. In my correspondence with Ray Kappe he elaborated on this point. He stated, "I had no intention for [SCI-Arc] to be rebellious. I just wanted SCI-Arc to become the best school it could be. The rebellious attitude came from Eric [Owen Moss] and Thom [Mayne] later."^{xxviii} This distinction of Kappe's, that SCI-Arc was not rebellious, is also supported by his comment to me that SCI-Arc did not take a position relative to architectural movements. He claimed that, "basically we were a school producing modern architecture. I don't like the term Modernism. In fact I am not fond of any ism."^{xxix} In November 1975 NAAB visited SCI-Arc and gave the school a favorable review in December.^{xxx} Kappe believed NAAB was "impressed by the work that was coming out of the studios. [Saying that] It was primarily mainstream;"^{xxxi} although, what is mainstream for Ray Kappe, perhaps, is still highly innovative, experimental, and ambitious.

This investigation into SCI-Arc's formative years remains incomplete. There are numerous students and faculty that still need to be consulted. There are countless projects to analyze and stories to tell. The ambition of this paper is to extract some of the potent moments of the school's turbulent beginnings. The suggestion here is that it is not entirely accurate to believe that SCI-Arc originated as a progressive outlier. Indeed, it may be more precise to view SCI-Arc as an institution of progress—an institution that sought to continue architecture's development toward advanced architectural practice.

Notes

i William Trombley, "Cal Poly Ousts Architectural Chairman," L.A. Times, April 26, 1972, B1.

ii Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J Smith, March 1, 2013.

iii William Trombley, "Dismissal of Cal Poly Pomona Architect Hit: Student-Faculty Group Charges President Erred in Ouster of Department Head," L.A. Times, May 29, 1972, C8.

iv Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J Smith, March 1, 2013.

v Thom Mayne, interview by Benjamin J Smith, July 25, 2012.

vii Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J Smith, March 1, 2013.

viii SCI-Arc Catalog, from Ray Kappe's archive at the Getty Research Institute (unpublished document, 1973).

ix Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J Smith, March 1, 2013.

x SCI-Arc Application, from Ray Kappe's archive at the Getty Research Institute (unpublished document, 1972).

xi Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J Smith, March 1, 2013.

xii Ray Kappe, "SCI-Arc History" (unpublished manuscript, December 19, 2012), Microsoft Word File.

xiii Ibid.

xiv Dick Garton, Ahde Lahti, Bambi Moise, Daniel Moran, Shiela Pinsky and Glen Small. April 04, 1974. "Urban Odyssey On Local TV Part One." In SCI-Arc Media Archive. Southern California Institute of Architecture. Accessed February 27, 2013, <http://sma.sciarc.edu/video/sci-arc-urban-odyssey-one-of-two/>.

xv Ibid.

xvi SCI-Arc Catalog, from Ray Kappe's archive at the Getty Research Institute (unpublished document, 1973).

xvii Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J Smith, March 1, 2013.

xviii Ibid.

xix Stephen Albert, Roland Coate, Jerry Compton, Shelly Kappe, Bill Simonian, Glen Small and Arnie Stalk. September 07, 1975. "Accreditation Meeting Roland Coate Stephen Albert." In SCI-Arc Media Archive. Southern California Institute of Architecture. Accessed February 27, 2013, <http://sma.sciarc.edu/video/accreditation-meeting-roland-coate-stephen-albert/>.

xx Ibid.

xxi SCI-Arc Catalog, from Ray Kappe's archive at the Getty Research Institute (unpublished document, 1973).

xxii NAAB, "About NAAB," accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.naab.org/about/>

xxiii NAAB, "NAAB History," accessed March 1, 2013, http://www.naab.org/about/naab_history.aspx

xxiv NAAB, "NAAB Mission," accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.naab.org/about/naabmission.aspx>

xxv The National Architecture Accrediting Board, "NAAB Conditions for Accreditation: For Professional Degree Programs in Architecture," 2004 Edition.

xxvi Stephen Albert, Roland Coate, Jerry Compton, Shelly Kappe, Bill Simonian, Glen Small and Arnie Stalk. September 07, 1975. "Accreditation Meeting Roland Coate Stephen Albert." In SCI-Arc Media Archive. Southern California Institute of Architecture. Accessed February 27, 2013, <http://sma.sciarc.edu/video/accreditation-meeting-roland-coate-stephen-albert/>.

xxvii Ibid.

xxviii Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J Smith, March 1, 2013.

xxix Ibid.

xxx Stephen Albert, Roland Coate, Jerry Compton, Shelly Kappe, Bill Simonian, Glen Small and Arnie Stalk. September 07, 1975. "Accreditation Meeting Roland Coate Stephen Albert." In SCI-Arc Media Archive. Southern California Institute of Architecture. Accessed February 27, 2013, <http://sma.sciarc.edu/video/accreditation-meeting-roland-coate-stephen-albert/>.

xxxi Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J Smith, March 1, 2013.