

Edmund Bacon

1991–92 recipient of the

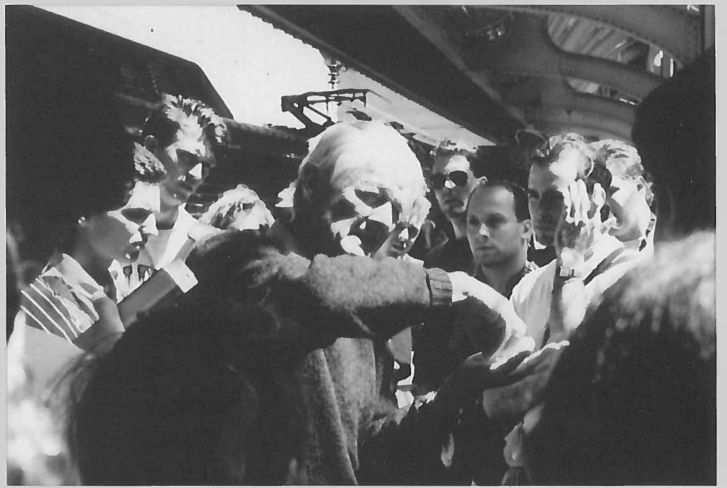
Plym

Distinguished

Professorship in

Architecture

School of Architecture
University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign



“In the city, what you need is the designer/creator person who is there and who is producing creative positive designs, who is continuously seeking the forces that are working in the community, pulling them together into broader design concepts, continually challenging the people of the city with bigger concepts and ideas and introducing brand new forces as they need to be animated into the city twenty or thirty years later. The central creative person! And I say to you, that that person is not an architect, he’s not a city planner, he’s not an urban designer, he’s not a policy maker. He’s a person, a creator.”

Edmund Bacon

Bacon at Illinois

On Design:

“As a designer you are capable of developing a concept which will result simply in a whole series of individual buildings with no particular reason or relation to each other or you can develop a concept which melts them together, creates synergy, and is exciting.”

“If you worry about the details at the beginning, you just get fragments. You let the darn thing flow out of you and it’s a totality.”

“I’ve never used numbers in any of my work at all. They play no part in my work.”

“I certainly am opposed to straight copying except when it’s good.”

On Making Things Happen:

“I’ll say this now and then I’ll dispose of it. You can despise everything about my design if you choose to do so and I’m afraid I won’t be devastated by that. Whether you like my design or not, I am a designer. The one thing I have done has been to make things happen. How could I ever do that? Because the stuff you saw in Philadelphia when you came there, almost all the stuff built since 1929, is actually the figment of my imagination. I know inside how I did it, and what I would love to do here at Illinois would be to communicate to every one of you exactly how I did it. Not that you would do what I did, but that you would do your own stuff according to your own crazy ideas—that you would be as effective as I was. Build what the hell you want but be as effective as I am!”

On the City:

“Every single little structure that you put in the city either advances it, makes it more beautiful, more healthy, more desirable, more humane, or it hurts. It makes it wounded, a source of decay and destruction. Those of you who are wise will go to the city and deal with it.”

“The idea of slum clearance is wrong. It’s crazy to clear when you have got vacant properties. Old buildings are invariably fun and everything else is so damn boring.”

On Philadelphia:

“I come to realize that I spent my entire life playing, in a way, along this two-mile-long set of lines that William Penn put there.”

“The greenway system of Philadelphia is just a re-creation of my cardiovascular system—I just made it bigger.”

“I visualize the whole thing by saying, like Pope Sixtus V, if you nail down an obelisk here and an obelisk there, then you can stretch a rubber band taut between.”

“As a young man, the idea of tearing down City Hall was mine. And it is undoubtedly one of the stupidest ideas that any figure ever had in history. The wonderful part is that it’s really like a love affair. Philadelphia has had many loves and wars and I was one of them. I wooed her quite consistently. But she selects from the many, takes that which fits her integrity, and rejects the others with great vigor.”

On Frank Lloyd Wright:

“Frank Lloyd Wright is an unexploited resource. I think that his designs for houses published in 1910 contained a whole new conception of architecture which didn’t exist in the world before. Frank Lloyd Wright is the whole answer to the modern movement. The modern movement got away with saying, ‘We’re clearing away Victorian decadence.’ That’s total baloney because Frank Lloyd Wright had already done it in a beautiful way, not a horrible way. I think he’s such a fantastic master. My admiration for him is just beyond dimension.”

On the Land:

"The source of all demand is the message of the land itself. Every single square inch of earth under your feet has its own unique character. Architects have that magnificent syndrome called the 'white paper syndrome.' They think the earth is white paper just waiting for their genius to stamp it the way they want it to be."

On Archetype and Architecture:

"There are two basic kinds of things to deal with. One is the configuration against the sky. That is the point where you connect with infinity. The second is the whole business about moving along the ground. As you move along the ground, you have a particular type of rhythmic stimuli which should relate to the physical fact of using your legs and body to move. This can be a harmonious and exciting sequence of musical experiences. To lose sight of either is a very bad thing to do."

"No matter who you are and no matter what building you build, and no matter how cheesy and little it is, if you presume to build a building, you have affected the 360° skyline which surrounds you everywhere you are every second of your life where the planet meets the infinity of the universe. You cannot, in anything you build, if you presume to build, avoid changing the skyline."

"In cities there can be a kind of symphonic musical sequence in the skyline."

On Positive Thinking:

"Substitute if, with when."

"If you can't believe in yourself, you might as well leave."

To Students:

"Whether you like it or not, you are the hope of the future. And you have to quit hiding behind your bushes. You have to go out in front and say, 'This is it!' and if you do that everybody will just fall away."

"I think the whole idea of going out of high school and into college and not designing for the first two or three years is absolutely terrible and I think you should revolt against it."

"Don't make any excuses for yourself and don't go into the syndrome about back in the days when we did it it was easy."

"All of your faculty, dear students, come in one of three categories—victim, victor or vector. All you have to do is find out which is which and act accordingly."

"What you did on the University of Illinois Philadelphia project is world shaking. The really incredible thing is that the best works are not all out of one studio, they are spread throughout. At least a dozen of your student projects are of a quality that no firm in the U.S. could match. One by Mira Metzinger is a most wonderful project. It has a quality of humanity and of scale and even a quality of rationality—it is incredibly sophisticated and well studied at all scales. My view is that it is an enormous contribution to urban design."

Compiled by Pete Courlas
Graduate Student in Architecture

Leonardo Diaz

Architect, Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham

I really did not know who Ed Bacon was when I first signed up for his class at the University of Pennsylvania four years ago. Some of my friends had expounded upon his great accomplishments, but I was skeptical. However, by the end of the semester his achievements were clear and I had come to two realizations. One was that, to me, his achievement lay not so much in the finished reality as in his vision, his ideas, and how he gracefully, but forcefully, engraved those ideas in other people's minds. The other realization was that Ed had been slowly revealing to us insights about himself, about urban design, and most importantly, about how to go about thinking and doing, no matter what field of study one was pursuing.

I gained tremendous respect for Ed as the class drew to an end: for his insightful observations, not only about architecture and urbanism but about life and living; for his ever-flowing quick-release energy, which jolts at unexpected moments; for his bluntness on all subjects he feels deeply about; for his ability to slice through the burdens of reality and zero in on what is important; even for his walking style—straight, fast, and with a purpose, as if he is indeed on axis.

He is more than a professor teaching a subject—the subject is almost secondary. He inspires his students and challenges them. Oh yes, he is always challenging right from the start. Ed has a way of tapping into his students' raw creativity and unleashing it to follow an idea that at times seems larger than life. It is as if he almost feeds on the energy that he unleashes from his students.

Although I never talked to Ed directly in class, I felt as if he was talking directly to me and to no one else. I am sure other students felt as I did, but perhaps only a few, for not all of my fellow classmates were enlightened by Ed. It was always exciting to see how some of his students took up the challenge he posed. It was also rewarding to see Ed's face as he entered a realm created by his students—a realm he inspired the search for but which became real in a way he never expected. This was certainly true of the Versailles project which I worked on. The Versailles presentation was an all sensory experience. Designed to be a room within a room, the experience took one in, physically, but through specific sensory manipulations projected one's

mind out into the various vistas offered by the actual Versailles palace and gardens. The manipulations included four extremely deep shadow boxes, which depicted various aspects of Versailles buildings, gardens, and social life of Louis XIV; views of garden axes projected by slides; and Baroque music and rustling autumn leaves underfoot to help complete the sensory tableau.



Ed always wondered how we arrived at the idea and how the whole group worked together. It is hard to describe the specifics in such a collaborative endeavor. I will say the idea came from a single mind and then there was a lot of inspired convincing and testing of wills to reach the implementation and fulfillment of the idea.

Clearly, Ed does not teach by the book (even though he wrote the book). He does not overly concern himself with the specific anatomical data of urban design. Ed teaches us a way of seeing, sensing, and interpreting patterns in the city, not just architectural patterns but those encompassing all one's senses as well. He teaches us to breathe, smell, and taste the larger picture. He shows us how to think of the city as a theatre, a continuous set of sets that are always changing. The city becomes an organism with roots like a tree. Ultimately urban design becomes the seed for growth.

It is my belief that Ed pushes us to reach an idea by interpolating between art, architecture, the human body, and the city. He inspires and admonishes us to work with others, including those who are guided by numbers and dollars and not by visions, to bring forth our own creative idea.

Elizabeth Price
Philadelphia Artist

I remember once describing to Ed a dream I'd had recently. In the dream was a space underneath a flight of stairs, a sort of closet, that I could enter. Inside was a lighted panelled space—a private hideaway. As I finished describing the details of the space, Ed exclaimed with his characteristic zest, "*Build it!*"

Ed Bacon is rare, because he is so truly committed to making dreams become reality. He maintains again and again that he doesn't understand how his students come up with the fantastic "presentations" (a mild word for what are actually grand participatory events involving all of one's senses) that they produce as the culmination of his classes. He maintains that he himself has "*nothing whatsoever to do with it.*" But the fact is that he has everything to do with it, simply because he believes anything is possible. If you can dream it, you can make it real. He imparts that belief, that unyielding support, and with it his students prove him to be right.

One signs up for a lecture class, but winds up immersed in a series of experiences. The course has three main components: a series of long walking tours in which one experiences the city in a way only Ed can instigate—blind-folded and walking through fountains, measuring the city with one's footsteps; a series of lectures which are a blend of Ed's energizing, galvanizing pronouncements mixed with more factual aspects of the development of a city plan; and, finally, a series of "presentations" by groups of students. All this is chronicled in a very important notebook which holds one's memories, beliefs, epiphanies, drawings, and who knows what else. Quixotically, what on paper sounds like a class, perhaps like any other, in reality becomes an exercise in experiencing life, in experiencing the city as a set for life, in experiencing urban design as a process for growth, in experiencing the creative process itself.

Of course the greatest task for Ed's students lies in proving that "anything" is possible outside of the classroom as well as within. Drawing from his own experiences working with various leaders of city government and with formidable numbers of committees, Ed shares many insights. Those committees seem inevitably to be peopled with non-visionary, numbers-

crunching "pragmatists" who constantly defy that "anything" is possible, or, more to the point, that it will ever make money. One of Ed's most basic and effective rounds of ammunition is simply to take the committee to the actual site. By taking them to experience the place, he opens up their sensory apparatus to the possibilities that he proposes. After all, architecture and urban spaces are to be experienced by human beings.

Another tactic in Ed's strategy is simply to keep at it—he does have some reputation for stubbornness. He explains it this way. If you have five main points to your design idea, present those. Invariably, the committee will shoot down four points, leaving one. Keep it, but come back with four new points. One of these will be accepted. Return with three new ideas. And so on. Eventually you will win five points—not necessarily your original ones, but five that you have devised and worked out. It is "*the power of the idea*" itself that enables Ed to shepherd that idea from concept to reality.

And indeed it is as though he is the shepherd guarding the idea. When the students worked in groups on presentations of the "morphology" of a city or section of a city ("cities" selected ranged from Disneyworld to Jerusalem to Versailles to Saint Petersburg), the same collaborative process took place. Invariably, individuals within each group assumed certain roles suited to their interests and personal styles. Invariably, too, one or two individuals seemed, almost unwittingly, to assume the role of "shepherd." Not "leader," for this "shepherd" did not stand in front and make the others follow. Rather, as the idea evolved, this shepherd somehow "guided," so that even with ten or fifteen individuals participating, each offering a highly creative and individual contribution to the whole, the power of the design idea still held. It is remarkably similar to the way in which Ed himself "shepherded" the development of Center City Philadelphia in the fifties and sixties—without controlling the individual contributions of the many, many architects involved. And so the classroom experience, in a sense, became a paradigm of the life experience of Ed Bacon.

One year the final group presentation included a re-enactment of the famous Palio horse race in the central plaza of Siena. The presentation culminated in the actual running of the race, with Ed, myself, and the other two teaching assistants competing against each

other on hobby horses. We literally ran as fast as we could around the crowded circular plaza surrounded by a cheering, jeering mob of over seventy students—all this commotion in a lecture hall which had been utterly transformed by murals and structures into medieval Siena. It was a wild and raucous event. Sometime after the race—Ed won, of course—Ed confided to me that his “*own greatest dream was to have that kind of relationship with (his) students.*” Running the Palio on hobby horses was truly fun, exactly as close as you can imagine to being ten years old again and running around with all your buddies. Quite the opposite of being somehow stuck in a protracted state of childhood, Ed affirms constantly the importance of play in human experience. Ed is very seriously at play in the world. Architecture and cities are to be experienced with one’s entire body, all one’s senses, as well as with one’s memory. One’s memory of childhood (and later) experiences is implicit in Ed’s vision of the city. One’s memories, like one’s dreams, often fuel the search for new visions.



Conversations at the Erlanger House



During the first decade of the Plym Distinguished Professorship, conversations at the Erlanger House have become a valued tradition.

Here at the home of the Plym Professor on campus, students and faculty have come to meet regularly to share informally thoughts, opinions and often a good bottle of wine. Indeed for many, the most lasting memories of Birkerts, Rudolph, Esherick, and Takeyama occurred in these elegant architectural surroundings. What follows is a record of such an evening at the Erlanger House with Edmund Bacon when six graduate students, Pete Courlas, Bob Dermody, Mira Metzinger, Amy Miller, Michael Pipta, and Elizabeth Rutherford joined the Plym Professor at his home.

Bob Dermody: If someone who did not know you or your background were to ask you what you do, how would you answer?

Edmund Bacon: I think I would tell them: I'm a specialist in totality. But I am a designer! The word *design* is a wonderful word, because it implies both beautiful pattern and form. It also implies purpose. A lot of what one does really has to do with having a direction.

Michael Pipta: And this direction, when did it begin for you? When did you decide that you wanted to be an architect?

Edmund Bacon: It was certainly at a very young age. I was just always interested in it. I made little houses when I was young. I made a marvelous garden of clay when I was a little boy. Then in high school I worked with an architect. I went to his office and did some measure drawings and did my own designs for houses. It seems as though it was always the thing I wanted to do.

Amy Miller: We understand you attended college at Cornell. Did your education start there or before that?

Edmund Bacon: I'd probably say that kindergarten is the most important educational experience I've ever had. I went to a private Quaker school in west Philadelphia, and the teacher had some odd ideas about disciplining children. Her idea was that if children were naughty, you treated them like babies and then they repented their sins. I was being a very good child and I was taught to be a good child. I looked out the window and there were bad children in the play yard and along came a balloon man. They bought these bad children balloons so they could feel like babies and repent. I thought it was absolutely great, so I quickly arranged to get into the bad children's class and learned from the first grade on that the best way to get on is to behave improperly, to break the proprieties, and to do what's wrong. All of my life is based on that, so that's probably my most important learning experience.

Elizabeth Rutherford: Did you always envision yourself becoming a leader?

Edmund Bacon: How old are you, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Rutherford: Twenty-two.

Edmund Bacon: I had no vision of myself at all in this regard. When I was twenty-two I had just graduated from college and was starting my trip around the world with \$5,000 my grandfather gave me. When I got to London it was a rainy day and I had to decide whether to go to the movies or go to the Royal Institute of British Architecture. I went to the RIBA and amazingly they took me in, embraced me, and gave me a great time.

I met Sir Raymond Unwin who was a very well-known city planner. He had a house out in the country and he invited me for tea. He said to me, "Young man, you should be a city planner." I thought this was the dumbest idea I'd ever heard in my whole life. I really did emerge gradually. I often lose sight of that when I talk to young people because I'm just so damn impatient that they should all go out and become city planners right away. I did study a course in city planning at Cornell. The only thing I learned was that city planning was impossible. I had no planning education whatsoever at any point.

Amy Miller: Mr. Bacon, what improvements do you feel are needed in the curricula of architecture schools today?

Edmund Bacon: My feeling is that design is like physical exercise. An athlete doesn't go through two years of learning philosophy before he trains to be a diver or a swimmer. Similarly, a musician doesn't spend two years talking about theory of music without touching an instrument. Design ought to start immediately after high school.

Bob Dermody: In addition to beginning design in the freshman year, are there other changes you'd like to see in architectural education?

Edmund Bacon: There are indeed. I give you a very straightforward answer. It is wrong to have any kind of education for architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and city planners, except where for at least the first two years they are all in the same identical studio and have the same identical education. Only after working together with no distinction should they branch off into their specialties. You can't bring segregated students together again, after separating them in the freshman year. Much of the basis for my feeling about the whole thing is that design is really a physical act. It is a creative engagement of your physical attributes, and like eating or breathing it has to be continuous. It has to be the foundation for everything in life. I think it is ridiculous to have an American Institute of Architects and an American Institute of Planners, and the universities are really the cause of this fragmentation.

Mira Metzinger: How would you incorporate planning principles into the curriculum?

Edmund Bacon: I would institute very rigorous and disciplined courses which would require students to learn the essential structure of the concepts behind great cities—Paris, Rome, Istanbul, Beijing, Isfahan. And I would have methods of actually testing whether students know these concepts by requiring them to draw the plans of these cities from memory.

Bob Dermody: People sometimes refer to such architects as Louis Kahn, Robert Venturi and Holmes Perkins as being part of the "Philadelphia School." Do you consider yourself part of that school?

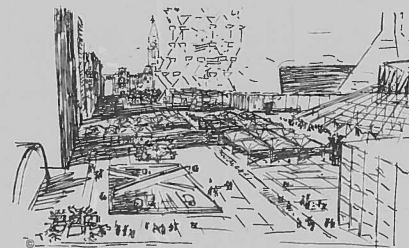
Edmund Bacon: Well, if you ask the Philadelphia School whether I'm part of them, they would give you a very distinct answer. I don't consider myself part of them. I just wrote an article to the *Philadelphia*

Inquirer, a comment about Lou Kahn. An international exhibition of his work opened just last weekend. I wrote about my experiences with him because people always say, "You were the city planner during the reshaping of the city, in a very influential position to allocate jobs, and with Louis Kahn, the greatest architect in the world in the same city, you didn't use his talents at all." Actually, the relationship between myself and Lou Kahn, if it is really understood, is very significant for architecture because it has a major lesson behind it. Let me give you a copy of my letter to the *Inquirer*.

*LOUIS KAHN AND THE PLAN FOR CENTER CITY
PHILADELPHIA
by Edmund N. Bacon
October 20, 1991*

Thomas Hine's article in the October 20 Inquirer, extolling the greatness of architect Louis I. Kahn, is illustrated by a drawing of Kahn's 1956 vision for Center City, Philadelphia. This was of extraordinary interest to me because, at the time this drawing was made, I was Executive Director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission and played a role in determining what architects received commissions for major public projects. Since Louis Kahn had no influence whatsoever on the extensive reshaping of Philadelphia during my Directorship from 1949 to 1970, the question naturally arises, "Why didn't I use Louis Kahn's talents in the planning work?"

The answer lies in a simple inspection of the picture in the Inquirer; huge, empty paved spaces, extending for



blocks, with no trees, no benches, no human attributes at all. Here are enormous structures of abstract design with no reference to human scale or civic delight. There is not a single redeeming feature in the entire ghastly proposal. Hine calls it a "vast pockmarked plaza which . . . is terrifying." He says, "most of Kahn's plans for Philadelphia are scary." In the light of this I find it odd to be constantly faulted for not having used my influence as city planner to get Kahn's ideas built. Had I done so I would have been one of the worst city butchers in history.

There is a curious bit of history which nobody knows but which seems relevant at this time.

When I first became Director of the Planning Commission I had the idea that I would do the dirty work; prepare the ground for buildings, get the underlying structure in place, the subways, the commuter railroads, the utilities and the pedestrian passages, and that Lou Kahn would bring the buildings up out of the ground into the light in beautiful architecture. In the late 1940's I initiated this process by inviting Kahn to work with me on the plan for Penn Center. This invitation he joyfully accepted, and we did work together on Penn Center for several months.

The pre-planning of Penn Center without any authorization to do so was so unorthodox a procedure that it offended the local chapters of both the American Institute of Architects and the American Institute of Planners; the former because there was no client and no program, the latter because there was no comprehensive plan which they thought ought to have preceded work on this project.

I knew, under the circumstances, that I had to strain every nerve to make explicitly clear to everyone the essential, acerbic underlying nature of the concept I had created; a new kind of space organization at the center city terminals of the underground transportation lines. I realized that here, on this strip of land between the underground commuter rail lines and the subway, if I was to produce a fine entrance into center city, I must greet the suburban passengers with something better than the dark, smelly sort of human sewers which so many of the underground stations at the time seemed to be.

I had the idea simply to lower the earth twenty feet, so the arriver would be greeted, not by blank walls, rather by the sun shining on fountains, flowers and trees. The sun wouldn't mind going the extra twenty feet, and the spirits of the arriving citizens would be uplifted thereby.

At the time I conceived this, 1947, it was a radical idea. The only thing faintly like it I know of is Rockefeller Center. This, however, was a purely private affair, and didn't have this kind of connection with the subway.

As I worked with Lou Kahn on the models and drawings needed to communicate this idea to the people of Philadelphia, Lou would say, "Wouldn't it be nice to put a curve here, a tower there, an exedra here?" I came to realize that the kernel concept was becoming encrusted with personal expressions of architecture, appropriate and necessary in the later stages of development, but disaster at this point in this unusual and virtually unprecedented procedure.

It is for this reason that Louis Kahn and I parted company on the planning of Penn Center, and that my dream of our partnership in building Philadelphia was shattered.

I tried again, several years later, in Market East, to bring Lou Kahn's talents into the Philadelphia planning work. Here I had already laid the foundations for the overall concept, and the work was ready for personal expression in beautiful architecture.



I gave Lou Kahn a city contract as architectural consultant on the development of plans for Market East.

Lou totally ignored the work that had been done. He came up with the irrelevant and awful idea of imposing four semicircles for no reason, totally destroying Chinatown, and devastating this whole section of downtown. It was deeply embarrassing for me because I had given him this city contract and the work he produced was worse than useless.

I think this is a sad story.

It is too important a story to keep under wraps. If only it were understood it would throw light on the entire existing, unhealthy relationship between the architectural profession and those who try to see the city, not in terms of individual buildings, but of the whole livability and joy of the environment.

I believe that the truly great architect must have many attributes; one of the most important of these is a sense of civic responsibility.

Bob Dermody: What are your views on the utilization of historicism in contemporary design?

Edmund Bacon: The total stripping of all historical reference during the three decades of the International Style was a total disaster. We lost much more than just columns or gothic arches. It is all one package. A Corinthian capitol evokes memories of architectural experiences. A church steeple instantly communicates



feelings, loyalties and sensibilities just by its shape. A dome is like bars of music. They all recall feelings in you which are very important to your enjoyment

of the city. They give a sense of continuity to different parts of the city. I think there will be a revival of appreciation of the archetypal symbols, particularly relating to the skyline and base forms as being a necessary part of the whole architecture of the city. It is going to be a new thing since it has been written out for 30 years. People have forgotten the importance of symbolism. They misuse it by imitating the form. That makes it almost schizophrenic and a travesty of something that is wonderful.

Elizabeth Rutherford: Would you say that the past three decades would be labeled as a “dark age” because of the lack of historicism?

Edmund Bacon: Absolutely, and I have a friend, David Clow, who gave it a much better name than that. He said it is an age of “sensory deprivation,” and that its consequences will be felt for a long time in a very bad way. We have absolutely failed to recover from it and to get our feet back on the ground. The International Style was probably the most inquisitorial style in the whole history of architecture. If I had even allowed a glimmer that I wasn’t a complete convert and devotee, which I never was, I would have been simply thrown out of any respectable gathering. There was no tolerance for any deviation from the rigid orthodoxy of the Mies Van Der Rohe philosophy. I hope that such a situation never comes again. It is intolerable that it should have been that way.

Bob Dermody: What do you think was the cause of this 30 years of “sensory deprivation”?

Edmund Bacon: Well, it all originated in Europe. It’s very ironic that they played on the notion that they were rebelling against the extravagances and decadence of Victorian architecture when Frank Lloyd Wright had already done that superbly with an architecture that was even more sensory than the Victorian. It was definitely a weakness in the architectural establishment. Harvard took in Gropius and succumbed to his idea that you were not allowed to teach the students history of architecture because it might pollute their darling minds. So everybody all over the country followed suit. I am particularly anxious that you don’t allow yourselves here to be dupes of the eastern establishment. Today in the east, the idea of deconstructivism is deeply rooted in many people. It’s contagious, and I think it’s a definite display of a very decadent state of mind.

Pete Courlas: Mr. Bacon, what is your get-away from architecture?

Edmund Bacon: I don’t want to get away from it at all. I revel in it day and night and I love it. However, I do have, what to my mind is a complementary interest, which is the development and balance of my own body. I believe profoundly that your source of design lies in your own body. Every single secret of science, every harmony of universe, is in your own body. There’s nothing that isn’t there. You know that you can either abuse your body or you can develop it to much more nearly the kind of perfection that it was supposed to be.

Bob Dermody: Mr. Bacon, is it possible to relate your tremendous accomplishments of the past to your current role as Plym Distinguished Professor here at the University of Illinois?

Edmund Bacon: It’s a very strange and haunting feeling to have experienced the fact of reshaping a city of four million people, and seeing it happen on an incredibly wide scale in comparison to what is usually done. It did literally cost billions of dollars to do the things which I proposed. To know how it was done is not easily put into words. Nor is it easily reduced to almost any of the symbols that people customarily use, because it’s a thing hardly anybody ever does. It’s a

real semantic problem, almost like trying to talk a different language. I accepted the Plym position because of a tremendous desire to share with young people this knowledge of how it was done so that they can make cities the way they want them.

Elizabeth Rutherford: What challenges do young architects face?

Edmund Bacon: You are the generation who will break the log jam. It is a great responsibility. For three decades architecture was under the thumb of the orthodoxy of the International Style which squeezed all life, beauty and joy out of architecture. Instead of realizing that we should get back to fundamentals and cast our eyes on the larger environment and urban development, we run around like a chicken with its head cut off—one stupidity after another: postmodernism, contexturalism, deconstructivism, and so on. The east is so rooted in decadence and procedures that it is not willing to be the source of the revolution that must come, and the west is too flaky.

Here in the midwest there is evidence of a simple honesty that must be the basic fabric of the new vision of what architecture is. I hope that you will sense the obligation and responsibility that history places on you, and that you will give real thought to the fresh view of where we are in architecture. I also hope very much that you realize that the true subject of architecture is the city.

That includes being aware that every single structure you put in the city is a part of a larger fabric that either enhances or denigrates part of the city. To sense



in your body, mind, and spirit the totality of a city and then to develop an action program to inject awarenesses, images and aspirations, is a great thing worth doing. That is your assignment.

Recorded and transcribed by
Robert Dermody and Elizabeth Rutherford
Graduate Students in Architecture

Robert I. Selby

Associate Professor of Architecture
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Edmund Bacon is an educator, *par excellence*. My perception of Bacon as an educator is not formed by examination of his formal credentials, or by requiring proof that he is a scholar, therefore a teacher. My image of Bacon is holographic, holistic and simultaneous, to borrow his phrase, from three personal observations of Bacon, the educator, in action.

I first met Edmund Bacon in October of 1985 at the annual St. Louis urban design charrette. As an invited juror, Bacon used the public review of projects to teach new generations of architects his central theme: *"If you're to deal with a city, you have to have an overall view; then you have to go through a very vigorous intellectual process where you separate the essential from the non-essential..."* Without an overall view, Bacon charged, the part of St. Louis we redesigned would have no relationship to the whole. My first perspective of Bacon was that he was a spellbinding teacher.

My second perspective of Edmund Bacon was in November of 1990. We invited him to review graduate students' projects for civilian reuse of Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and to discuss these projects at a public forum at the Graham Foundation in Chicago. This he did with gusto! He told the students that their participation on this project was *"a turning point in the history of architecture...(due to) the fact that it occurred. I would have the suspicion that there is no other university in the United States that ever even thought of doing a project like this, or if they decide they would do it, would actually do it..."* Of students' work, Bacon said, *"I thought you weren't going to be able to do a damn thing, that all you would do would be to stick your little buildings on the land and call it a plan. I was very surprised at your Urbana-Champaign Campus. In four short weeks every single student somehow extracted some kind of design idea."* Bacon then charged our students to get involved in urban design: *"Architecture must take over...because nobody else is doing it."* It was clear that Bacon was on a mission to inspire students to the highest aspiration of the profession.

Edmund Bacon's tenure as the 1991-92 Recipient of the Plym Distinguished Professorship in Architecture provided my third perspective of Bacon as educator.

Bacon's public lectures were delivered with zeal characteristic of a preeminent educator. He called for students to become *"creator/city builders"* to view cities as living, growing organisms, and to view them holistically, three dimensionally, with detail and texture experienced through movement. Cities, he taught, require a discernible language with intelligible, not fashionable, uses of formal precedent. In public forums, Bacon urged students to ignore the artificial borders between the disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture, urban design and city planning. In graduate design studios, Bacon introduced his design idea through a *real* project to redevelop Philadelphia along the banks of the Schuylkill River. He empowered students to design at an unfamiliar scale, beyond the limits of the property line, and to consider the meaning of outdoor space. He reminded architecture students to design the macro and micro scales simultaneously. *"Scale is critically important. I can't emphasize that enough."* Edmund Bacon revealed himself as the educator's educator at faculty colloquia. He asked us to consider what was most important to teach about architecture. Bacon propagated a holistic view of design and, therefore, design education. He warned against overemphasis on computers and on numbers which *"kill the creative urge before it starts."* What is needed, Bacon insisted, are programs that stimulate students' creative powers. With a sense of self-confidence students will be able to relax and to discover their capacity to produce holographic images. *"Within each person lies all the rhythms of the universe. Helping each student to discover this should be a primary goal of education."*

For me, Bacon's credentials as educator are ample and valid. Perhaps the best précis of my three point perspective of him is to quote his poem which he read as the conclusion to his second public forum:

*"Ideas are forged
out of the collective unconscious
by individuals.
Ideas are created by individuals
but they do not
belong to individuals.
Ideas, if they are potent,
produce the institutional support necessary
for their realization.
Ideas, like kites, fly only if you let go of them."*

Ronald E. Schmitt

Associate Professor of Architecture
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

As the course coordinator for the UIUC graduate design studios participating in Ed Bacon's Philadelphia Project, I have had firsthand opportunity to observe the grace, aplomb, insightfulness, and probing critiques of Edmund Bacon in the pedagogy of the urban scale in architectural design. He is an amazing man and educator.

While planning for the Schuylkill Riveredge Study in Philadelphia, Professor James Warfield and I visited Edmund Bacon in his city. He immediately led us on a walking trip through Center City West and the area of proposed study. Although it became evident he had an agenda, he was not a tour guide. Instead, he created the circumstances that enabled us to discover some of the urban successes of Center City West. His commentary was economical but precisely on target. This must have been a touch of the participatory education and heightened sensory awareness that Bacon elicited from his students while at the University of Pennsylvania. We moved on to the rough landscape of speculation at the Schuylkill Riveredge. With nimble agility and the zestful movements of a much younger man, he led us up steep embankments and over fences so that we could experience the potential of the currently underused and misused site. The next day was spent in meetings with architects and developers of dormant or defunct developments proposed for the west and east banks of the Schuylkill. Although Bacon was undoubtedly well-versed with the proposals through past and current consultancies, he attentively listened through our meetings that he had arranged and allowed us to ask most of the questions. Again, he enabled us to learn by creating the circumstances for inquiry rather than simply passing on information.

The extent of Edmund Bacon's educational experimentation became evident on the first day of class as the students assembled together for orientation and viewing of three Edmund Bacon films. These films, two from the *Understanding Cities* series and *Philadelphia's Ed Bacon*, served as an apt initiation into urban design for the students and were examples of Bacon's innovations in educational mediums and techniques. Perhaps more than any other architectural educator, Bacon has pioneered the use of film for

educational purposes and to simulate the space and time sequence of the urban experience.

On the Sunday afternoon of Labor Day weekend, Professor Warfield, Professor Hub White, and I, along with a chartered bus load of students, met Edmund Bacon on the suburban train platform of the 30th Street Station in Philadelphia. Bacon arrived early and greeted each student as that person arrived on the platform from the narrow access stair. From the platform vantage point overlooking the project sites and while curious passengers awaited their trains, Bacon enthusiastically and succinctly briefed the students on Center City and the Project. Then, looking



much like a pied piper, he led the students on a tour of the renovated 30th Street Station and immediate site environs. Edmund Bacon's dedication to the

city and his commitment to design excellence were obvious in his first meeting with the students and helped sustain their efforts until his visit to Urbana-Champaign.

Bacon's first lecture at the School, as well as subsequent ones, was a forceful presentation illustrated with powerful examples and enhanced by superimposed and dissolving images. The technique of stacking projectors and achieving perfect registration of coinciding views with microscopic adjustments is an example of Bacon's arduous planning and preparation for sharing experience and establishing continuity as a symbol of the city and urban experience. The superimposed plans of Philadelphia that represented growth over time were especially vivid and pertinent. The following day was the first of the Public Forums. The format made the themes and opinions of Edmund Bacon even more explicit and exposed. The student questions were probing and challenging. The meeting with students from the graduate studios doing the Philadelphia Project that immediately followed the forum was even more intense. There were some questions of clarification about the Schuylkill River sites and the "program" which required student interpretation, definition, and elaboration. However, most of the questions were more intrinsic and were conveyed with statements of understanding and conviction. How quickly they learn. A few days before, many of these

same students were paralyzed with the fear of having “to do something we have never done before” and with the sheer size and scope of the problem. Edmund Bacon had provided a catalyst for a meteoric rise in awareness, confidence, skill, and understanding of urban scale and design. It was a rare and rewarding experience.

The idea of design as a whole and its centrality are fundamental with Bacon. He believes design is holistic and “*comes out of the land.*” Therefore, he believes in sharpening one’s sensory awareness; perhaps to better prepare one’s subconscious to understand the messages of the land and to translate that into compatible images or forms and with a sense of community. In architectural education, he believes design should begin immediately and not be postponed to allow several years of “grounding” in other courses. He suggests obliterating the distinctions of architect, landscape architect, city planner, and urban designer, and, instead, advocates the “*creator/city builder.*” As a design studio critic, I share many of these same tenets; however, it is the keen perception and skill of Bacon’s critiques of the student’s designs that I most admire. As a teacher, I appreciate the manner and technique of his critiques. When Bacon was on my faculty juries (we call them reviews now), he was an excellent and sympathetic critic; however, when he alone critiqued selected Philadelphia Projects from all of the studios and then again for all of my students’ work, he was at his best. He immediately grasped the essence of the concept for each student’s project and quickly responded to it with precise insight and clarity in a forthright but appreciative manner. The students understood his points clearly. He gave praise and dwelt on the positives. What he didn’t say was as important as what he did say although undergraduate design students may not have grasped that silence. Bacon indicated he may have held preconceptions about design of the Schuylkill Riveredge Project, but he maintained an open mind and was responsive to student proposals. He said he learned from the students and that many of their designs created a new perspective for him to re-examine the redevelopment possibilities of the Schuylkill River sites. This receptivity and spirit is another mark of a good teacher. Although Edmund Bacon will leave a great legacy of urban design with very tangible evidence in Philadelphia, his greatest but less obvious legacy may indeed be the impact on the students with which he has had contact.

Michael Pipta

Graduate Student in Architecture
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In the short time I have been acquainted with Edmund Bacon I have gained an understanding of one of the many factors contributing to his design decisions as city planner for Philadelphia. He views the tree as a model for city growth.

According to Bacon, it was his great teacher, Eliel Saarinen, who initiated the concept of the tree. Saarinen did not see the tree as a static element such as a cone or a sphere. He viewed the tree as a dynamic organism within the environment. Furthermore, he believed that the tree consisted of two fundamental forces. The first, an expanding force, is the urge for creation—out of a seed, a tiny spot becomes a growing mass. The second is a restraining force, without which the growing mass, the tree, would enlarge and fill the earth. In order for the tree to survive it must conduct its nutrients from the outermost ends of its roots up through the trunk to its outermost branches. Saarinen implied that the point of equilibrium where these two forces exactly balance determines the form of the tree.

Bacon has used this concept of the tree throughout his career as city planner for Philadelphia. He believes that as designer you, yourself, are an enzyme working in the tree. The roots and branches are already in place. Your goal as designer, then, is to facilitate the transfer of the nutrients to the branches for life to progress. This idea of facilitation of growth becomes the underlying meaning to obtain your objectives. It becomes a process to give direction to a city. Thus, the city can be viewed as a dynamic, living organism, fluctuating and continually changing, as opposed to a series of static images.

Amy Miller
Graduate Student in Architecture
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

As participants in today's educational process, we are challenged by Edmund Bacon to redefine the essential nature of architectural education. He suggests that design is like playing the cello; one continually utilizes the necessary faculties for retention and development. Deferring design at the onset of college is an unfortunate deprivation to a student with creative instincts. As a result of this deferment, the design process becomes much more of an intellectual exercise than an experiential one.

As aspiring designers and builders of tomorrow's cities, we initiated a progression at the moment when design became an inextinguishable desire in our lives. From the beginning, consciously or unconsciously, we nurtured this creative impulse. However, most institutions postpone our entry into the design studio. This has become the fashionable paradigm. Deferment, according to Edmund Bacon, is now a force of habit rather than a cognizant practice. This pause at the inception of design education at most universities causes apprehension, undermines confidence, and stifles desire for many aspiring designers. Edmund Bacon argues that too much of architectural and planning education is directly responsible for a student's loss of self-confidence, doubt of impulse, and desensitization.

Inflicted by deferment, the result of the "intellectualization" of the design process has been the loss of the experiential aspect of architectural education. Design has become scientific calculation as opposed to intuitive practice. Professor Bacon states, "*I believe that architectural education should be much more physical, tactile, and participatory than it is.*" Our education cannot be based solely on design theory but must encompass constructability and the internalization of structure.

Edmund Bacon equates the discussion of the creative process within a university to the discussion of sex in a Victorian parlor—illuminating the nonexistence of either. He opens one's eyes, guiding the discovery of that which is present as well as absent. To consistently challenge the existing paradigm of architectural education is the only action capable of addressing the condition of the profession. If we are given the opportunity

to begin design early, to trip over our own feet along the way and to initiate the design process hands-on, we will be capable of sustaining the creative impulse inherent in us all.

Afterword

This is the fifth in the series of commemorative booklets celebrating the participation of important architect/educators at our School. Readers of the previous four will note that this one differs in content from the others which featured articles about the Plym Professor by colleagues of note—famous architects, critics, educators and scholars—Pelli on Birkerts, Barnes on Rudolph, Moore on Esherick, etc. Each original entry exposed a relationship between colleagues of acclaim.

When I approached Edmund Bacon in September for suggestions as to who might write for him, he exclaimed, "*Terrible concept! Who cares what they think—let the students write. They always come up with the most incredible and wonderful projects.*"

So we did.

This edition reflects the thoughts of Edmund Bacon's students—past and current. Although each set out to describe a work or a project accomplished with Bacon as mentor, the booklet ultimately reflects Edmund Bacon's description of a fluid concept. What began as an effort to explain "how we did it", by will of the participants, emerged as an altered but equally clear idea. It is a Profile of Edmund Bacon—Shepherd, Manipulator, Spellbinder, Catalyst, Dreamer, Father, Playmate, Planner, Creator Role Model—Educator! Edmund Bacon, "straight, fast, and with a purpose, as if he is on axis."

James P. Warfield
Professor of Architecture
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Edmund Bacon
1991-92 Recipient of the Plym Distinguished
Professorship

Compiled and Edited by
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*Edmund Bacon with Professor R. Alan Forrester and
Mr. Lawrence J. Plym*

The Plym Distinguished Professorship in Architecture

The Plym Distinguished Professorship in Architecture has been endowed through a gift made to the School of Architecture in 1981 by Mr. Lawrence J. Plym of Niles, Michigan, past President of the Kawneer Company and formerly director and officer of a number of other companies and institutions prior to his retirement. Mr. Plym and his family have a long association with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Plym Distinguished Professors and Faculty Liaisons

1982-83	Gunnar Birkerts	James Warfield
1983-84	Paul Rudolph	Arthur Kaha
1986-87	Joseph Esherick	Henry Plummer/ Botond Bognar
1989-90	Minoru Takeyama	Botond Bognar
1991-92	Edmund Bacon	Robert Selby

The Plym Professorship is conferred on an architect who has a distinguished record of achievement and who can make a contribution to the enrichment of the professional education of students in the School of Architecture. The Professorship is a visiting faculty position and includes teaching in selected studios and seminars, participating in the School lecture series, preparing an exhibit of professional work and joining in colloquia with faculty. This visiting faculty position is for a period or periods during one semester in the academic year.

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