

SCI-Arc Builds on Pedagogy:



Benjamin J. Smith

1800 Berkeley Street

The Southern California Institute of Architecture is a school that set its pedagogical ambitions toward attitudes of freedom through self-study.

Ray Kappe, a Los Angeles based architect and professor, proposed the formation of SCI-Arc and was the school's first director. SCI-Arc opened on October 2, 1972 in a leased Santa Monica warehouse for which Kappe supplied the rent deposit.¹ The school sought an alternative approach for educating future architects. This approach favored individualism and horizontal social structures. SCI-Arc's unique pedagogy distanced itself from large-scale university regulations and encouraged personalized design methods from the faculty and students.

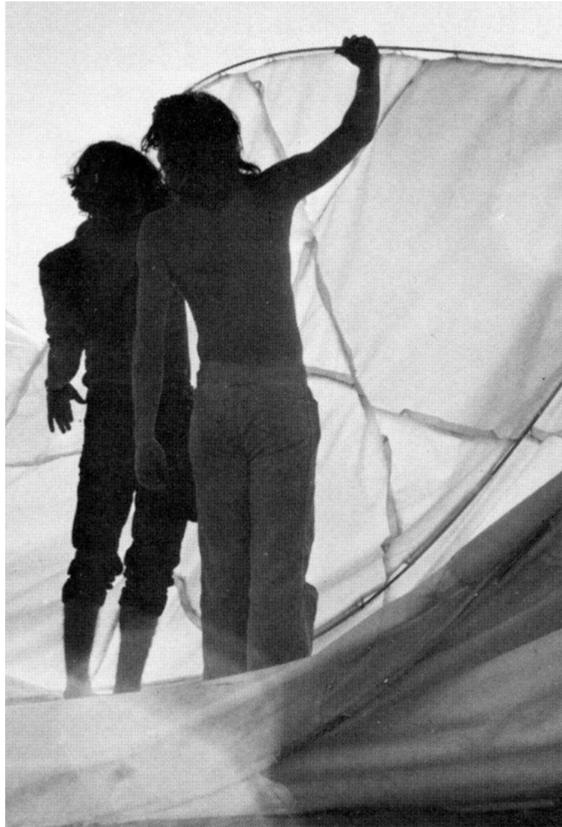
In the summer of 1972 SCI-Arc leased its first building at 1800 Berkeley Street. Multiple strategies of education were offered. These included a more structured curriculum that comprised different studio and seminar options. It was also possible for students to structure their

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."² 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.³

In Mary McLeod's essay, "The End of Innocence: From Political Activism to Postmodernism," within the recently published book edited by Joan Ockman, *Architecture School: Three Centuries of Educating Architects in North America*, McLeod

Facing page: 1800 Berkeley Street prior to SCI-Arc.

1. Glenn Small, "SCI-Arc Illusionist," Small at Large (blog), accessed August 25, 2012, <http://www.smallatlarge.com/2012/08/illusionist>.
2. *SCI-Arc Catalog*, from Ray Kappe's archive at the Getty Research Institute (unpublished document, 1973).
3. Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J. Smith, March 1, 2013.



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Above left: Students building tent structures, from the school catalog, c. 1970s.

Above right: 1800 Berkeley Street exterior.

regards SCI-Arc as a school “driven by formal experimentation.”⁴ A distinction she makes is that SCI-Arc began, as Kappe had intended, as a school “developing a regionalist Modernism that integrated architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning with ecological concerns to create a synthetic form of environmental design.”⁵ This interest of Kappe’s, to integrate the three disciplines, began at Cal Poly in 1968 when he was the Chairman of the architecture department there.

In a correspondence I had with Kappe in 2013 I asked him about his embrace of interdisciplinarity from his beginnings as an educator and the pedagogical benefits that this model of learning could bring forward. Kappe said, “collaboration among disciplines was always a significant part of the design process. In the late sixties it was thought that the idea of the star architect was over, but by 1972 the New York Five were on the architectural scene, and there was a return to the individual.”⁶ The New

York Five are Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk, and Richard Meier who participated in a seminal exhibition, *Five Architects*, at MoMA in 1972. They are part of the Cornell, Cooper, Princeton axis of 1960s and 70s American intellectual architectural discourse and representative of the American neo-Modernist movement that stems from Colin Rowe and his interest in returning theory back to the form of architecture. Los Angeles and SCI-Arc in the late 1970s proposed a postmodern alternative, which McLeod groups into an example of a “postmodern condition.”⁷ McLeod suggests that Kappe’s focus of a regional modernism and interdisciplinarity lasted until “a group of younger faculty, including Thom Mayne and Michael Rotondi soon took SCI-Arc in another direction, emphasizing perceptual qualities [and] formal experimentation.”⁸

SCI-Arc and Los Angeles architects resisted the canonical standards set by other schools and architects on the American East Coast and

4. Mary McLeod, “The End of Innocence: From Political Activism to Postmodernism,” in *Architecture School: Three Centuries of Educating Architects In North America*, ed. Joan Ockman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 180.
5. McLeod, “The End of Innocence,” 190.
6. Ray Kappe, personal Correspondence, March 1, 2013.
7. McLeod, *The End of Innocence*, 180.
8. McLeod, *The End of Innocence*, 190.

Arts in society

Big shed syndrome

Reyner Banham

The New School has got a big shed (murmurs of envious congratulation). Actually, it's not really a shed, but a former warehouse. Still, it gives them two huge bays of clear industrial floorspace, under shallow-pitched glazed roofs, with doors back and sides big enough to shunt an articulated truck in and out. And across the street front, there are two storeys of very plain office space, under a flat roof (some kind of pent-thing lurks behind the parapet), with strip windows running right across, and a very slightly projecting door-frame round the front door. Paint all its flat stuccoed surfaces a dead chalky white and it might just be architecture of a low-profile sort—except that who'd ever notice one way or the other, down there at the junction of Berkeley and Nebraska in a forgotten pocket of industrial grottoe halfway between the Santa Monica beaches and the University of California Los Angeles campus?

They are noticing already. The New School is a breakaway group of architecture faculty and students from Cal State Poly at Pomona. Given the prestige that new schools enjoy both in architecture and in California, it is going to get visited—and envied, because, in the architecture school business, a Big Shed is a hot property at present.

The first clearly recorded outbreak of the present epidemic was around ten years ago, when Big Jim McCullough (the laird of Bennington) and a fact-finding bunch of Bennington brass, on a tour of New England art departments, decided that it was the storage spaces under the arts building at Brandeis they ought to emulate on their own campus, not what was visible above ground. And the most closely studied case has recently wracked the School of Environmental Studies at University College, London, where I teach.

What makes the idea of an architecture-free building so infectious is, of course, its freedom from architecture. It means that you don't find yourself competing with somebody else's aesthetic ego-trip, which may be anathema to your own. The idea is irresistibly attractive, except for one thing—an architecture school's building (ditto for art and design) is a public statement about what's taught inside, and an architecture-free solution is a profession of no-faith in your own discipline and curriculum. It's a problem that is unique to these studies: schools of dentistry don't have buildings that commit them to attitudes on fluoridation, say.

But the architecture of an architecture

school will inevitably be read as so directly indicative of the intellectual content that Paul Rudolph's 1963 Arts and Architecture Building at Yale was described as "a curriculum cast *in situ*." Every detail of its ridge-hacked concrete surface was scrutinised for educational implications. In a sense, this was realistic. The interior seemed to be arranged like some sort of theatre around the "crit pit," where the high ceremony of the "jury," or final review of a student's design, was conducted. But after Rudolph's departure, this spectacle of visiting prima donnas poncing all over students' work in public became less important, and the case was reversed.

What had been a confession of faith now became a confounded nuisance. The great interior spaces filled up with do-it-yourself privacy screens and other structures. Finally the whole thing was put to the torch in a fit of student rage about something else. Frankly, my own sympathies are with the privacy-seekers, if not the arsonists. But it's what you might call a chastened sympathy, after what we have been through at UCL over Wates House, the proposed new building for Environmental Studies.

We lumbered Anthony Cox, the architect, with the advice of a representative/participative body, rejoicing in the title of the Expanded Wates House Committee. The scheme on which building work has finally started is, after all the discussion, nearly a Big Shed—though this still does not dispose of one painful part of the problem: what the building looks like. On the site of the old Endsleigh Hotel (immediately behind Friends' House on Euston Square), we shall erect something that looks remarkably like a cut-price version of the old Endsleigh Hotel.

There are quite convincing reasons why this should be so, given our human and financial resources, the nature of the site, and the legal restrictions framing it. The result is neither a profession of faith nor a statement of no confidence: it is, rather, a resounding admission that anyone who hopes to build must acquiesce in the status quo. It neither says that we believe in Architecture with a capital A, nor that we repudiate aesthetic ego-trips. It says that we accept the situation where an architect is a kind of marriage-broker between a client's needs (however expressed) and a whole variety of external constraints.

For the constraints on our situation prevent any messing about with double-height studios and mezzanines and other architectural fancies that are presently making life difficult in art and design studios around the globe. (Harvard is now stuck with a design school consisting *entirely* of mezzanine galleries, if you can believe that.) All we shall get will be standard single-height floorspace, which we can dispose of as we like, Big Shed style. To some extent, this is a solution of exhaustion. We couldn't even begin to agree to anything else. But there are also those among us (besides me) who actively believe that this is right.

For one thing, we saw what happened at Yale (and, to a more muted degree, at

Central Poly, London). For the other thing, we saw what happened to us in arguing about what sort of building we should have. The argument may have done more for environmental education than the building ever will. A Big Shed interior, with almost nothing fixed, ensures that the argument must continue. We have willed a building in which the position of no internal wall (well, almost none) can be blamed on an outside force known as the architect. We have insisted that the interior be at our disposal. There have certainly been ructions whenever a plan has been posted up that shows any interior partitions at all, even when they are annotated "for costing purposes only." We have created for ourselves a situation where the interior must always be in a state of existential flux. Thus: if a partition is not moved from time to time, then the school community is not exercising its collective responsibility to growth and change. But whenever a partition is moved, then it must mean that a minority interest is being strong-armed by bigger battalions within the school. The weaker don't go to the wall. The wall moves on them . . .

All this differs from any other organisation rearranging its spaces only in one absolutely crucial respect—that we are supposed to be experts in the arrangement of space, its human use, perception, social cost, cultural consequences, and all the rest of it. That's our business, staff and students together. We shall be laying it on the line as members of the internal community, committing ourselves and others to spatial decisions that help some and harm some. It's going to be hell in there: an endless Synanon game, with the state of play recorded in breeze blocks and plaster.

Perhaps some faint divination of such drastic group therapies to come may account for the fact that the New School doesn't really make significant use of its own Big Shed. Instead of spontaneous seminars and autonomous work groups camping out all over the Shed and colonising its expanses of smooth uncluttered floor, the state of play when I was there appeared to be that most of the drawing boards had been squashed into the old offices on the street front, and seminars tended to happen on a small gallery hard up under the roof. And this in the home town of Synanon!

So the freedoms of the Big Shed are a utopian illusion? No, they are as real as they ever were. But the price of that freedom may be too high to pay on a day-to-day, for-ever-and-ever basis. I hope that at UCL we will be able to bear the psychological wear and tear involved, because the educational yield could be enormous, and continuous. But what may happen, of course, is that we decide that we would rather learn the one thing that can only be learned once from any one building, and hand the whole problem over to an architect, to be solved "once and for all." We might thereby learn what it is that architects uniquely do that other specialists can't do. But only those around the school at the time would learn it first hand as lived experience.

demonstrated a do-it-yourself attitude reflected in the pedagogy and professional practice of the faculty. The freedom to experiment and being unafraid of failure characterized the attitudes of success at SCI-Arc. Kappe explained to me when I met with him that freedom to experiment meant recognizing that it is ok to make mistakes.⁹ Coy Howard, a longstanding SCI-Arc faculty member, also shared a similar sentiment, suggesting to me in a recent interview that it is important for creativity to find comfort in failure, to be able to learn from mistakes and move forward.¹⁰ The thesis regarding the outcomes of this kind of understanding is that novel practices of architectural production were developed and given agency within the pedagogical discourse at SCI-Arc as legitimate modes of architectural practice and experimentation.

One way to consider how architecture could develop these alternative outcomes is through an examination of its means. In December 1972, Reyner Banham published an essay about SCI-Arc in *New Society* three months after the school opened. The article "Big Shed Syndrome" emphasized that SCI-Arc's building served as a tool for pedagogy.¹¹ Banham recognized an attribute of the SCI-Arc space that promoted an environment for architectural thinking that was "architecture-free."¹² Banham's argument in his 1-page essay used SCI-Arc to exemplify, raise suspicions, and critique the "shed" concept as a learning environment for architecture that was a kind of architectural utopia due to the inherent freedoms within this building typology. This,

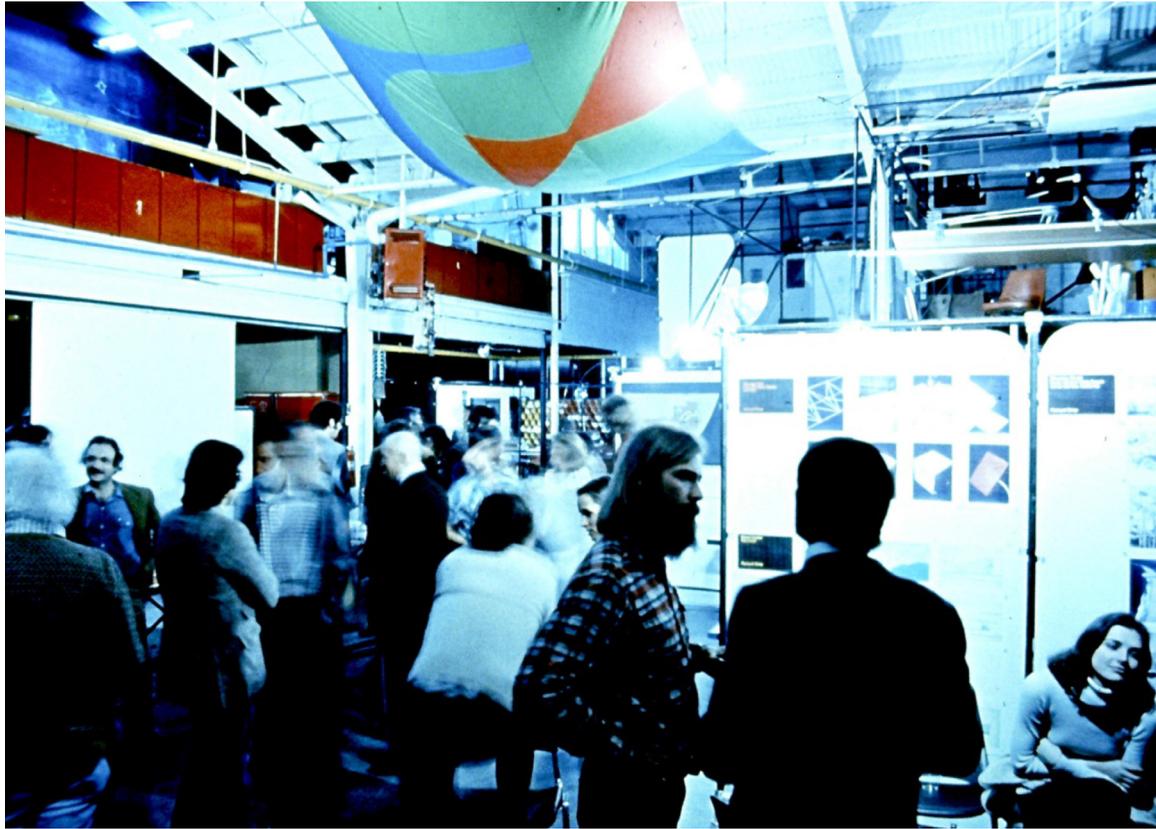
coupled with Ray Kappe's distinct approach to embrace a "college without walls"¹³ concept for SCI-Arc is compelling for the exploration of the school as a laboratory for architectural and pedagogical experimentation for both its faculty and its students.

The example of SCI-Arc's first building is demonstrative of one way that SCI-Arc attempted an alternative approach to architectural education and can be seen through the relationship the students and faculty shared in developing the institution from the ground up. An early challenge the school had was financing the renovation of its first building.

The adaptive reuse of 1800 Berkeley Street became the first design project for the school and began the summer before SCI-Arc officially opened. This challenge became an important pedagogical exercise that demonstrated how students and faculty engaged decisions regarding the origins of a new institution where anything was possible—with the caveat that there were inherent limitations due to a tight budget, material restrictions, and the politics of use. Kappe described to me that when they took over the lease of the old warehouse in Santa Monica both students and faculty worked together to make the school operational as an institution for architectural education.¹⁴ This included creating design studios, seminar rooms, a library, and a space for all-school meetings and lectures. The design and execution of these physical features made the building an instrument to provide a trajectory for learning within the school. This

Above: Reyner Banham, "Big Shed Syndrome," *New Society*, December 1972.

9. Ray Kappe. Interview by Benjamin J. Smith, June 13, 2013.
10. Coy Howard, interview by Benjamin J. Smith, June 27, 2013.
11. Reyner Banham, "Big Shed Syndrome," in *New Society* 22, no. 533 (21 December 1972), 702.
12. Banham, "Big Shed Syndrome," 45.
13. Ray Kappe, "SCI-Arc History" (unpublished manuscript, December 19, 2012), Microsoft Word File.
14. Ray Kappe, personal correspondence, March 1, 2013.



Above: Event at SCI-Arc, c. 1970s.



Above: SCI-Arc studio space at 1800 Berkeley Street, c. 1970s.

experimentation within an “architecture-free” building must have contributed to SCI-Arc students and faculty to construct three types of design studio spaces in the school.

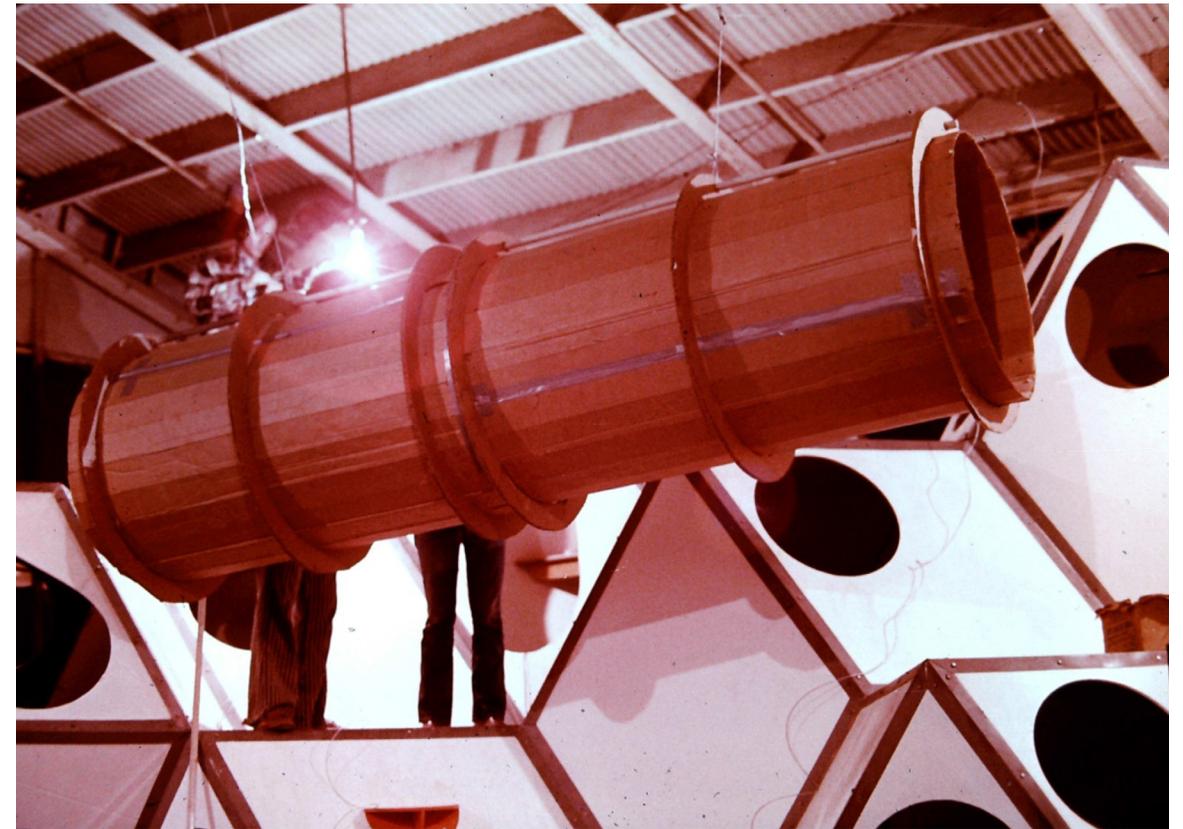
One studio space was a rhombic dodecahedron structure, also called, Community '72, that had been started at Cal Poly by Ahde Lahti, Bill Simonian, and Glenn Small and was transported to SCI-Arc's Santa Monica campus where it was completed as a school activity. The first SCI-Arc application announced that this project was “the opportunity to live in prefabricated stacking modules and study the behavioral, social, and political patterns.”¹⁵

A second 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.¹⁶ A third type of studio space was described to me by Michael Rotondi, SCI-Arc's second director

and one of the first students to graduate from SCI-Arc. This studio was only used by several students, but was a perch structure designed and built by Rotondi to be more secluded.¹⁷

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, offer a lesson in the economics of owning and selling, and contribute to a student's understanding of making things.¹⁸

Eventually this system created a problem due to incoming students feeling that the spaces were being inflated beyond their value. The school bought them back and distributed them equitably among the students.¹⁹ From this pedagogical framework, that could be nimble and change easily, the mixture of opportunities and the ability to use the building as an armature



Above: On the rhombic dodecahedron studio structure at 1800 Berkeley Street, c. 1970s.

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

16. Ray Kappe, “SCI-Arc History” (unpublished manuscript, December 19, 2012), Microsoft Word File.

17. Michael Rotondi, interview by Benjamin J. Smith, June 25, 2013.

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

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

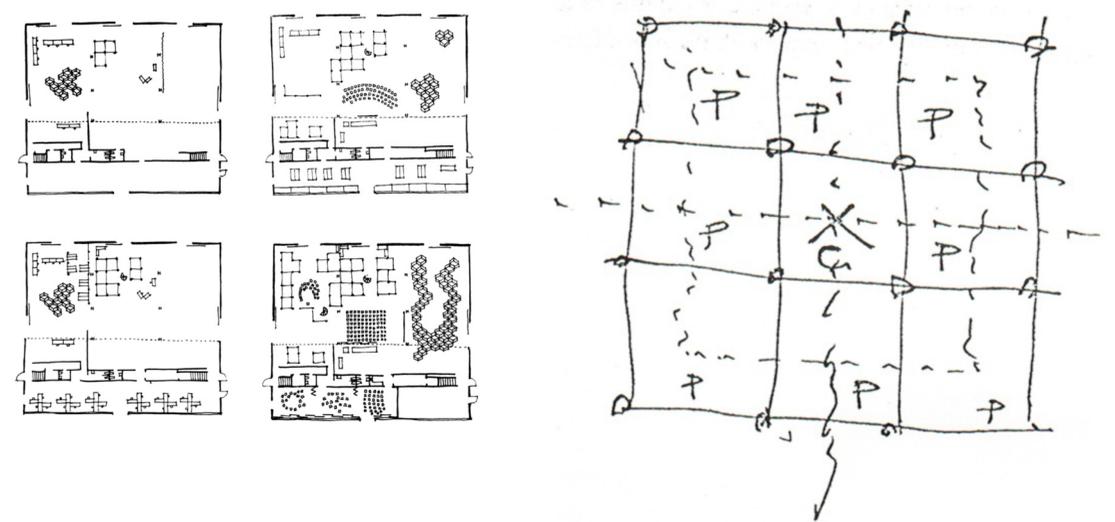
to design with, build in, and use daily was an experiment in learning that was embraced at SCI-Arc and was instrumental to the speculative ethos of the institution.

The pedagogy of this architectural problem can be compared to a different approach, but one that also used architectural design to find balance between freedom and constraint—John Hejduk’s didactic exercise of the 9-square grid at Cooper Union in New York. The impetus for this comparison is that although the two concepts, a college without walls and the 9-square grid exercise, suggest differing outcomes for architecture, it is useful to show how design skills being taught at two very different architecture schools in the 1970s could be discussed from a similar framework that made use of distinct parameters facilitating the design process.

Hejduk’s 9-square grid exercise established a conceptual parametric apparatus for students to work through formal architectural operations.

Through the 9-square grid Hejduk identified the potential for complete fluidity and complete containment that used a matrix of nine squares organized by 16 columns. Hejduk proposed this kind of problem for architecture students as a way to become familiar with a specific set of elements and conditions of architecture, giving those elements stakes. Hejduk described 16 elements that the exercise can consider. He does not limit this list to these 16 elements, which are: grid, frame, post, beam, panel, center, periphery, field, edge, line, plane, volume, extension, compression, tension, and shear.²⁰ In this way the abstract field of representation and composition is used to digest architectural conventions through drawing. The elements Hejduk lists could be recognized as architectural tropes loaded with potential through the ways that they are used and combined.

SCI-Arc’s origins share a similar interest in architecture that developed through freedom and constraints, but grounded more directly



20. John Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa*. New York: Rizzoli, 1985, p.37.

Above left: Ray Kappe, space planning diagrams for SCI-Arc at 1800 Berkeley Street, 1972.
Above right: John Hejduk, sketch for 9-Square Grid Exercise, 1954.

within physical reality. Kappe's pedagogical approach proposed a different apparatus than the 9-square grid to establish a structured looseness. In Kappe's inception of SCI-Arc, the students and faculty literally built the spaces and the politics of the institution themselves from inside the scaffold of the warehouse in Santa Monica and from within the context of architectural education. This too has distinct parameters, which were explored through economies, materials, fabrication, and the socio-political forces of space, form, and organization. This exercise at SCI-Arc worked to limit the school's expenses that operated with a small budget and developed a bond between students and faculty through the shared work of building the school together.

SCI-Arc's catalog described the school as an "institution in process."²¹ This quality asserts that there is value in discovery and experimentation within the processes of working, rather than having an a priori solution for an architectural problem. This malleability within the SCI-Arc pedagogy was intended to teach young designers how to be creative, flexible in their thinking, and learn how to follow their ideas through—a learning experience emblematic of Kappe's desire for architects and architecture to have "the freedom to become."²² For Kappe, the attribute of an institution in process was important to maintain throughout his directorship. His belief was that this gave SCI-Arc a unique identity within architectural culture—one that he continues to find important for SCI-Arc today.²³

21. SCI-Arc Catalog, from Ray Kappe's archive at the Getty Research Institute (unpublished document, 1973).
22. Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J. Smith, March 1, 2013.
23. Ray Kappe, correspondence with Benjamin J. Smith, March 1, 2013.



Above: Lecture in the SCI-Arc "Main Space" at 1800 Berkeley Street, c. 1970s.