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Some time ago on the pages of a Montreal architecture magazine, one of Vancouver's prestigious architectural academics published a rather vicious rebuttal of an article I wrote on an exhibit of the work of five well-known west coast architects. The rebuttal writer happened to have curated that exhibit. No doubt in his own mind he was defending his honour and that of his exhibitors.

I'd made no attempt to be fair-minded about my criticisms of the exhibit. I was genuinely irritated at the self-congratulatory smugness of the exhibitors and the curatorial hand behind them, which seemed satisfied to say "ain't all this creativity incredibly neat?"

Since I'm not an architect, I had nothing to lose (or to gain, come to think of it), and I think the editors of the magazine printed the article because they recognized my neutrality. I spent a decade as a metropolitan planner with various urban professionals, including architects, long enough to have become familiar with the twists and turns of a half-dozen urban professional vocabularies. In picking up that familiarity I sat through enough handshake meetings and eye-contact bullying to last me a lifetime. I also discovered how far from theory current practice has drifted, and how much of the "urban design" process goes on in the dark and dirty. The article talked about that side of the professional process, and it didn't seem to me that I was saying anything out of the ordinary.

The venom of the offended curator's rebuttal took me by surprise. But when I looked at what he said more carefully, I realized he didn't discuss the ideas I laid out. He was interested only in discrediting my expertise, as if that would discredit what I'd said.



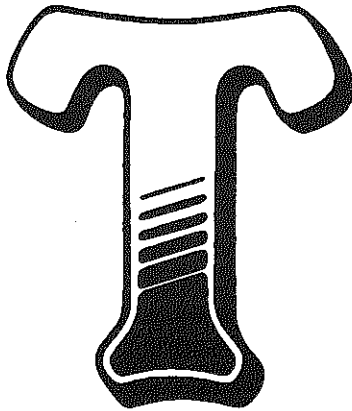
THE SATURATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL CLASSES

For most of this century, professionalism, and the attitudes and public values associated with it, have been treated with exaggerated respect, so much so that most of us don't question the profound ways in which professionals affect us.

Architecture, to paraphrase what he said, is an extremely complex and sensitive professional field, one that responds to and is shaped by the complexities of urban life. Since it is so important and so complex, he continued, it can only be understood by professional experts, which is to say, those who are, as it were, "intimate" with the profession. The profession should be discussed, judged and regulated only by its expert practitioners, just as it has been for most of this century. Amateurs are dangerous, he implied.

He went further to describe why I was a particularly dangerous amateur. I won't repeat the really yummy details, except to note that at one point he made the Nixonesque gesture of implying that I was a Commie Radical. As his crowning put-down, he inferred that I was little more than a sleazy pimp for my own chocolate phrases. Whatever truth there is in his charges isn't the point, however — the violence of his response indicates that I'd hit an exposed nerve.

Subsequent to the publication of the rebuttal, I've discovered that my acquaintances within the architectural community have real difficulty responding to the issue the curator unwittingly raised about professionalism, its meaning, its rights and duties. And the issue is worth repeating in its barest formulation: **Is architecture (or any other profession) a subject matter best kept within the purview of professionals in the field?**



That question, I suspect, would be answered with a resounding "yes" across our civilization. For most of this century, professionalism, and the attitudes and public values associated with it, have been treated with exaggerated respect, so much so that most of us don't question the profound ways in which professionals affect us. Yet we live with the unpleasant results of that unquestioning respect every day, and we may soon have to live with it in considerably more profound ways.

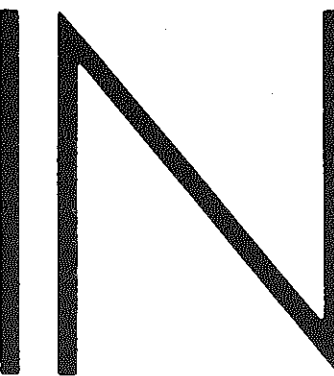
If you're not sure what I mean, look at the way in which the medical profession has used its privileged position to centralize medical facilities in Canada. If you examine the governing logic behind it, you will find that in recent years these facilities have been built, particularly in our urban centres, in close proximity to the personal residences of the doctors and to the offices of their stockbrokers and real estate agents. To rationalize the procedure, the doctors have formulated a cost/efficiency phalanx that no government seems able to penetrate. It has made medicine, along with banking, one of our few active growth industries. Along the way, the doctors have also been ensuring that medical facilities are **not** being provided in the areas where they are needed, which is to say, where their patients actually live.

In Greater Vancouver, for instance, a new megafacility for the treatment of children's ailments was recently built on the west side of Vancouver, despite that wealthy area's already small and declining child population, and the fact

that the suburbs now hold the majority of the population and a considerably greater preponderance of the region's children.

The official reason given for choosing the west-side site was that it is close to existing medical amenities. The real reason, one suspects, is rather closer to the kinds of amenities noted above. Similarly, a recent court decision has headed off an attempt by the government to channel incoming doctors to the areas that need them. This, ruled the court, is an abrogation of the doctors' entrepreneurial rights.

And entrepreneurs they have become. In 1983, after a restraint-intent government renegotiation forced their fee structure downward slightly, the doctors responded by billing more frequently. The result was a de facto increase in average gross income of more than 20 percent. No other explanation is possible: they simply generated business for themselves. Other professions, with varying degrees of success and efficiency depending on the degree of service monopoly they enjoy, pursue the same self-regulating isolation from economic, political and social reality and justice. And that is just the tip of the iceberg.



other countries, self-regulated professionals operate with similar privileges. During the 1970s, the Argentine military became the envy of military professionals across the world, spawning a whole new set of professional and ethical procedures that are currently being followed wherever bananas will

grow — practices that are dreamed of in many countries where bananas are kept in the fruitstands and supermarkets. Infra-agency incarceration of political enemies, the administrative technique of "disappearing" dissenters and the creative use of helicopters in obtaining information were all pioneered by these self-regulating Argentine professionals. Thirty-thousand people died in the process, although the exact number, ironically enough in our world of statistical exactitude, will never be known.

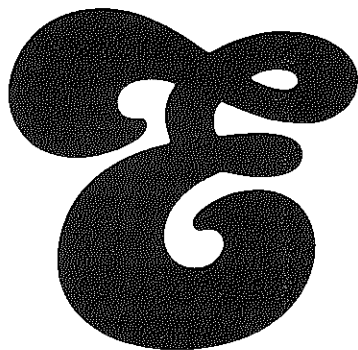
Admittedly, the Argentine example is an extreme one, but as an illustration of what an overabundance of entrepreneurialized professionals can create, it has validity. What occurred in Argentina took place at least in part because the upper echelons of the military were overcrowded with trained, ambitious professionals able to operate more or less outside direct public control. Luckily, we do not have Argentina's history of political violence, but we do have an overabundance of professionals in nearly every field except the military. They are, for the most part, under the same marginal levels of public supervision and they are, to all appearances, stuck with a similar entrepreneurial spirit.

Because this kind of overabundance in the professional classes is unprecedented in modern civilization, and because it is a phenomenon grounded in relatively obtuse social-economic data rather than ideology, it has been hard to read. For the most part, our society operates as it has for the last century: professionals are universally regarded as a crucial ingredient to social and economic well-being, and are accorded automatic privileges and an aura of social dignity, while for a decade now graduates in most fields have had to scramble for employment — often unsuccessfully, like ordinary wage labourers.

Amongst architects, competition is perhaps the most fierce, and the unemployment levels are highest. Only the truly gifted or well-connected graduates now find work as architects. The rest end up as draftspersons or carpenters. Many of them abandon the profession altogether, and become entrepreneurs of one sort or another. They've been well-trained.

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Depending on who one talks to, architecture is currently facing either an armageddon in which only genius and a warrior class will prosper, or it faces a ten-year construction hiatus in which only prudent and well-managed firms will survive. Certainly our commercial and residential superstructures are now overbuilt, and are running on the system's inability to brake itself. We can't go on building public facilities with a dwindling tax-base, and sooner or later the pension funds, which continue to fuel the housing industry almost by themselves, will be forced to ingest the feedback coming from the real estate market and will change their investment policy. Architecture is unlikely to maintain anything like even the present employment levels.

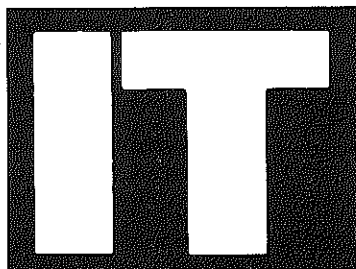


educational professionals are in a different, but uglier predicament. At the universities, which grew massively during the 1960s and early 1970s and then abruptly ceased to grow after that, the faculties are larded with mediocre and overpaid academics shadowing their considerable wage and workload privileges, protected by self-serving arguments about academic freedom and a tenure system that has lost most of its integrity and its public credibility. Few universities have hired new junior faculty in a decade, and most are tottering with intellectual senility.

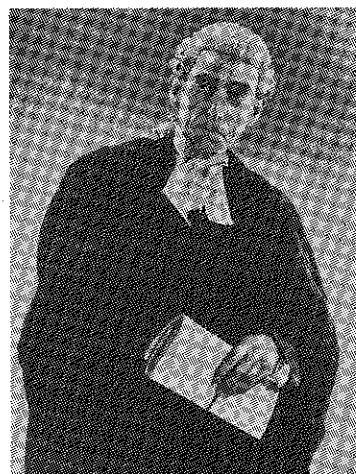
The college and trade school system, which took in and employed the younger products of the same professional growth splurge that populated the universities earlier, have become proletarianized. These institutions are loaded with burned-out teachers fighting amongst themselves for students on the one hand and job security on the other. Like the universities, they are responding to saturation and reduced budgets by protecting their upper echelons, and are even more liable to the same simultaneous decay and loss of credibility with the public.

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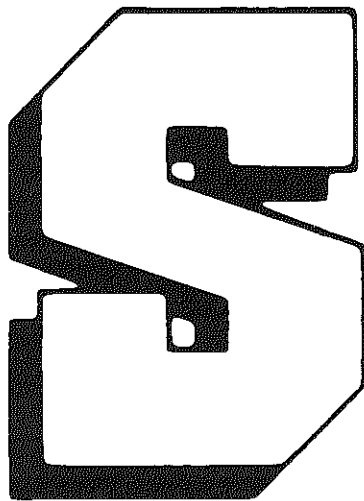
Budgets don't appear to be shrinking that much, but classroom sizes are growing again, high-contact professionals and sub-professional services are being replaced by video-based rote teaching technology while the middle managers argue with disgruntled 3-R conservatives within the government and amongst the public over whether our children should be educated to live in Disneyland or in the 19th century.



is difficult to gauge the impact of saturation amongst legal professionals. The entrepreneurial spirit has been around in this profession long enough for Shakespeare to have made one of his characters suggest killing all lawyers as a way of lessening corruption, and most of us have heard the old gags about disaster-chasing lawyers or the more recent ones that tell us that sharks don't bite lawyers as a professional courtesy. A more serious indicator of the effects of saturation might be the massive increases in civil litigation in the last two decades and the increasing tendency of government, business and labour to seek the solutions to political and moral problems through the courts.



The internal workings of the legal profession are undoubtedly the most vigorously protected from public scrutiny, and this is not likely to be altered easily so long as the profession continues to generate so large a portion of our elected political representatives. For a time, a decade ago, lawyers seemed bent on providing universal and relatively democratic access to legal justice, and to their credit, the profession has landed on the liberal side of most issues involving the provision (or withholding) of rights and privileges in society. But since about 1980, legal aid budgets and legal education programmes have shrunk considerably, and the profession has been, at the very least, ineffective in fighting the cutbacks. A cynical view would have them preoccupied with their investment losses, or transfixed by the promise of entrepreneurial opportunities afforded by the new constitution and the legal bureaucracy it seems to be engendering.

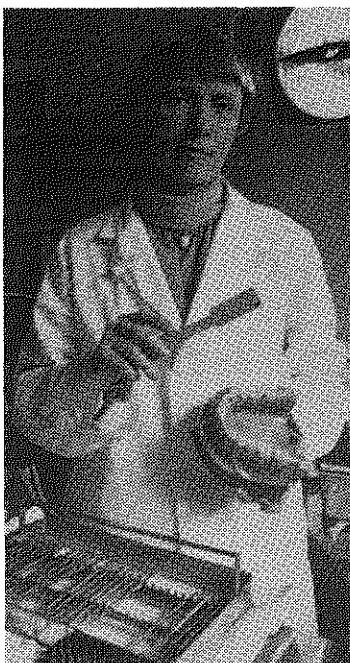


social work — a loose and proletarianized term for a wide variety of professionals whose function is to prevent or redress the social damage inflicted by modern technological society on the culturally fragile, underprivileged or backward — has long been a hotbed for professional entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurial opportunities in recent years have withered on the liberal side of the field but have picked up enormously on the reactionary side. As social subsidy programmes aimed at increasing the dignity and autonomy of the

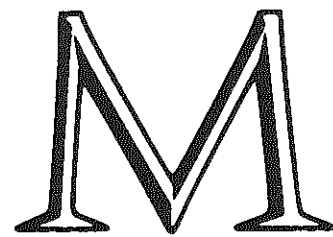
traditionally underprivileged sectors of society — the poor, the handicapped and the elderly — are slashed, ersatz professions like criminology spring up to provide different kinds of professional opportunities.

Criminology is peculiarly symbolic of the new social work — it's a lard-filled discipline whose purpose, aside from giving news reporters someone to quote whenever a prison riot or ugly crime is committed, is aimed at rationalizing the shifting fashions for warehousing the sector of our population that runs seriously afoul of the law.

Residual Christian ideas about charity have pretty well withered now, and the Rousseauist intellectual structure that originally generated social work as a profession in the early part of the century has disintegrated into a self-serving entrepreneurial melee similar to the one in education. The difference here is that with its original goal of effecting universal social justice lost or subverted, with its patchwork mandate reaching into almost every other service monopoly, and with pressures created by the decrease in general wealth, bureaucratic body-snatching and careerism are accepted norms.

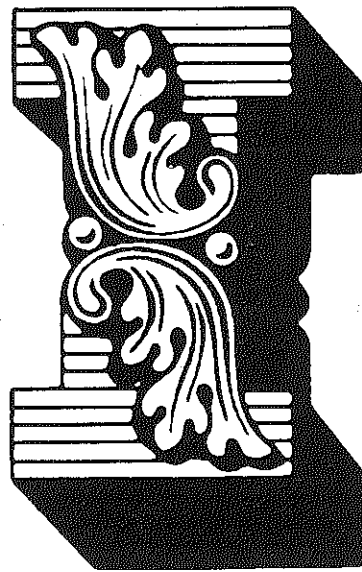


Just recently there has been an outbreak of bizarre incidents in which social protection agencies have violated the rights of individuals. Sometimes, no doubt, there were good reasons behind the actions taken, but more than one or two instances carry remarkably transparent evidence that the agency involved was creating business for itself. What society is being subjected to, as these professionals run around drumming up business for themselves, is a phenomenon that should be called "pathology fads", aimed at identifying — or generating — heretofore hidden social problems. Child molesting, anorexia nervosa and incest have been subjected to this kind of hysteria-creating professional entrepreneurialism. The methods used to identify and seek out perpetrators and victims are reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition.



Money is the dominant fetish of our society, and, not surprisingly, it has pulsed out a whole hierarchy of professionals for itself in direct measure to the recognition that no one really understands how money works. While there is some accuracy in the response, it also contains some brutal ironies. The proliferation of economic think-tanks is an illustration of how a profession, faced with the collapse of its theoretical base and growing public distrust of its working, sets up self-serving agencies to generate predictive opinion about what it would like to see happen. The purpose and methods of economic think-tanks have become increasingly politicized and less grounded in research and theory as their predictive accuracies descend to the level of sheer absurdity.

Similarly, the field has generated an army of professional experts in tax evasion and manipulation at the same time as professionals instruct our governments to go on operating the tax system on a cargo-cult logic, trying to attract industry with convoluted tax concessions which are instantly (and predictably) matched elsewhere. If one accepts that increased government borrowing is a de facto form of taxation, the insanity of this is immediately evident.



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could go on, but by now any reader can easily follow the phenomenon into any profession and collect his or her own data. The inescapable conclusion is that the professions are out of control. The question to be asked is not whether it is a problem, but what can be done about it?

Without a fundamental re-examination of the role of the professions, one focused on the social responsibilities of the professions rather than on the rights of individual professionals, not much can be done. Currently, few professionals seem willing to go along with such a re-examination.

Let's look at the structure of the problem. First of all, in most instances, the professions are unalterably linked to service monopolies. These monopolies are funded by the productivity and wealth of the body politic, and as that wealth has stabilized and/or begun to shrink, the growth capacities for services likewise have stabilized or shrunk. Adjustments in priorities can occur, but that is all. Service monopolies, if the self-regulation of their professional practitioners is operating in the interest of society, should be responding to this new situation on a disinterested ethical basis. That isn't happening. One key reason is because all the professions are saturated. There are simply too many hungry professionals around waiting to devour the weaklings.

Second, almost every profession thus has reacted to saturation within its ranks by ignoring and in some cases loosening ethical responsibilities. They have engaged in entrepreneurial activities within and outside their area of social control and/or influence. To be blunt, the professions have become far more interested in protecting their upper-middle class splendour than in serving the public interest.

Third, and harder to grasp, is that with the saturation of the professions there has occurred a corresponding decay in theoretical research and the ethical thinking that, in the early days, always accompanied professional activities. If this extremely dangerous decay is to be reversed, it can be accomplished only if the general public demands a coherent accounting of professional procedures and privileges.



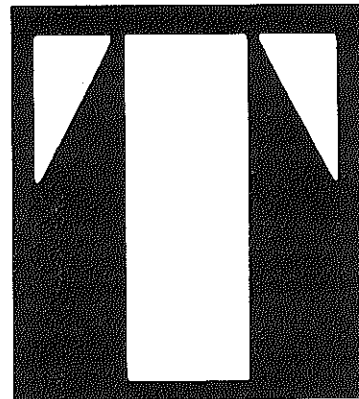
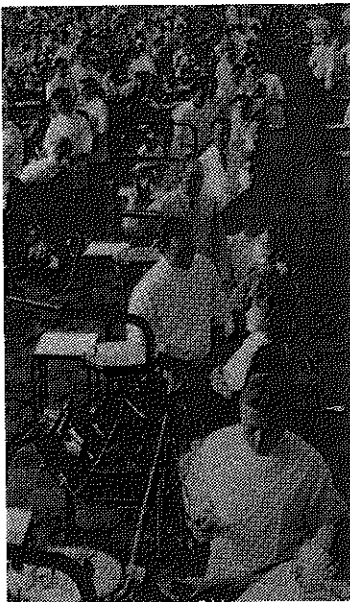
It is unlikely that the professions can continue to regulate themselves. Aside from the outbreak of entrepreneurialism, their main response to saturation thus far has been to specialize. At first specialization might have been an accurate reaction to complexity, but in the current environment, which is highly competitive and self-regulating at the same time, it rarely accomplishes what it sets out to do — except to generate more work. Specialization has become mainly a means of generating business, despite the isolated and very well-publicized miracles it produces. They make good news, but they don't address the essential problem. And with the fashionable but simple-minded political enthusiasm for solving all our difficulties by "unleashing the entrepreneurial spirit", specialization is becoming socially as well as economically dangerous.



Perhaps we have to reintroduce the notion of "public service" and "general good" — however awkward and difficult and unfashionable those concepts have been made to seem. They should be made the subject of an ongoing and broadly-based public debate, one that the professions themselves should have initiated ten years ago but didn't. Such a debate may not sound like fun, but it offers more possibilities than what we are currently doing, which amounts to little more than fighting over a rapidly-emptying gravy-pot, and selling our children into a future of public bankruptcy and the slavery that will result from it.



The obvious place to start the debate is at the cornerstone of democracy: public education. During the 1960s, the entrepreneurial spirit in education began to generate an entire and isolated field of education — now called, variously, "adult education" or "continuing studies". Despite the altruistic basis of this kind of education, it is dangerously misdirected. A quick glance through the courses offered by any of the many existing programmes will show that the vast majority of courses offered are aimed at self-improvement, with either a vocational or recreational focus. People can learn to be more vocationally skilled or competitive, or more self-satisfied, ruthless or physically fit. The subject matter offered up is largely asocial and at times, openly antisocial. This attitude is now invading the more traditional forms of education as well, but it is right here at the level of voluntary education that it should be challenged. Instead of promoting individual skills, the curriculum should be discussing the fundamental values of our society and the duties, as well as the rights, of citizenship. And that is the subject matter, rightly taken, of the liberal arts.



The liberal arts are out of favour with governments right now, who seem more transfixed than anyone with the idea that only the entrepreneurial energies of society will renew our overextended economy. Most politicians are aggressively convinced that it was the liberalism of the fifties, sixties and seventies that got us into this mess in the first place. In large measure, they are correct. They may also be right about the value of entrepreneurs, but only in a much more limited sense than the one being applied. As much as any single factor, what got us to where we are has been entrepreneurs within our professional classes, the ones who, well-meaning or not, extended service monopolies without regard for the fact that the capacity to provide services has a very direct relation to general wealth.

Only a renewal of liberal arts curricula can generate the general debate over professionalism that is needed to bring the professions into measure. But first, we have to deprofessionalize the liberal arts, which have earned a large measure of their currently unpopular status because of the mire of self-serving departmental turd-polishing at our universities and schools.

Liberating them will take an enormous effort and a great deal of political courage. But liberal arts are the accurate subject matter for adult education, and adult education, in the deepest sense, is what we must have.

Brian Fawcett is a writer who has worked for the planning department of the Greater Vancouver Regional District. Among his books is the recent **Capital Tales**, published by Talonbooks.