

## ARAM MOORADIAN IN CONVERSATION WITH THOMAS WEAVER

In many ways the great facade of the AA's four townhouses should be celebrated a little more – it is, after all, the thing that distinguishes it from every other school – all those anonymous building looking like office blocks lost within college campuses. It is also a more endearing silhouette of the place than any logo could possibly provide.

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There is that strange and appealing confluence at the AA of the Englishness of its Georgian facade with the internationalism of its occupants – a resident population whose identities and idiosyncrasies are somehow preserved within the compartments of the school's inner rooms and corridors. To force through a kind of brand identity and collapse these spaces into single volumes not only creates homogeneity where you once had heterogeneity but also enacts the most predictable of architectural clichés – knocking down walls and turning vertical into horizontal. The open-plan is really hugely overrated and terribly over-indulged.

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There used to be a logo for the AA but no one really paid it much attention. 'Design with Beauty, Build in Truth'. It seemed kind of appropriate. In the AA shop it was attached to the only two things that revealed an allegiance to the school – a black sketchbook and a steel Zippo lighter (and the only two things that you needed to survive away from the AA). Now the front of the AA is obscured by its own AA™. The school is beginning to promote itself not through the quality of its education but through the extent of its advertising.

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The end-of-year graduation photograph is one of the biggest missed opportunities at the AA. Instead of the tired and boring group shot, all the graduates could position themselves in windows, doorways, steps and parapets across the four main facades. It would show people occupying the series of houses that had been their home.

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The AA was always a house that students came to visit rather than permanently occupy. It was structured around its provision of a bar, a restaurant, a library, a bookshop, a lecture hall and pin-up spaces. This seemed to be a radical way of compressing an architectural education down to its essentials. So you worked away from the school in deliberate isolation, and appeared only when you wanted exposure. The alternative – the studio – operates like an architectural office – 24-7 masquerading as 9 to 5, privileging attendance over individuality, and where all time is actually spent queuing to print a file or buy a cup of coffee.

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Every other school of architecture is large and slow-moving. The weight of their institutionalism gives them a strength and the range of university departments around them complements the education they offer, but their size also prolongs all decision making. The independence of the AA, in contrast, allows it to be far more nimble, anticipating trends and hiring interesting people. The success of the AA has to be predicated on its simplicity – as a school in London that promotes free thinking as opposed to a globalised, bureaucratic institution.

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At the top of 36 Bedford Square is the office of its director. The head of the school has always sat here, nicely undercutting the grandeur of his political position (at the top of an autocratic pyramid) with the modesty of his location (in the low-ceilinged rooms of the second floor). These contradictions have always seemed to have defined the AA.

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The only things visible through the grand *piano nobile* windows of the AA's first floor are the crystal chandelier in the Front Members' Room and the shelves of books in the library. To build an architecture school around these two things (ornamental traces and a place to read) makes so much sense, but from the outside the books now appear more ornamental than the chandelier – incidental, decorative like wallpaper, they offer a flat two-dimensional gesture towards learning, when the depth of a real library should always be supported, so that it grows with the school around it, constantly renewing itself.

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The  
big, black front  
door of the AA at 36  
Bedford Square – more than  
anything else, an entrance to an  
architecture school. It is a door that is  
always open except when it is closed.  
Standing in front of it, as students and  
visitors pass endlessly in and out, one  
man remains still. This is AA security,  
a permanent fixture, like a gargoyle,  
conversing with anyone, shooing away  
bike thieves, carrying models and  
offering all forms of assistance, and  
whose job was always to ensure the  
health and safety of the AA's students,  
rather than being forced to administer  
the Health & Safety of an institution.





c. 1903: 5th Grading Year Group photo

#4 CORRECTION: The final sentence of Mark Cousins' article should have read: "It is the *Vitruvian* diagram of administration, a spatial and institutional virus." The appearance of the word "Victorian" was an error, and we are sorry for the mistake. Ed.

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