

Board Meeting – 02/20/18

There was a time when Cooper Union possessed the self-confidence to call itself **The** Cooper Union. This was done without hubris, an acknowledgement of the uniqueness of the institution.

I believe we lost this when we devalued our fundamental ideals to obtain a LEED platinum certificate for 41 Cooper Square.

The vision had gone—the requirement was for adherence to the status quo—no wonder the fundraising got nowhere. How could Cooper Union alumni subscribe to something which they had been taught to abhor—the mediocre. 41 Cooper Square could have been revolutionary—a truly *green* building in one of the largest conurbations on the planet—an example to the rest of the world—a building that uses what's at hand to support naturally driven systems. But no we became a follower.

Then we were broke—what did we do? We followed—we charged tuition—we didn't cut costs as promised. We're now on the other side of a lawsuit which nominally brought together the antagonists and the protagonists—but it didn't. The antagonists wanted disruption of the status quo—they want to return to our founder's core principles.

Yet again we're back to convention—we bow to the mighty God of the CFI—an index derived from the performance of institutions that bear no relation to Cooper. We talk about money but appear to pay little heed to who we are, where we are and where we are going.

The FEC feedback sessions were empty, the great Hall was far from full for Laura's inauguration. Applications are down, acceptance rates are up and yield is down. Record numbers of students are on academic probation in the school of engineering and Cooper Union is missing from meaningful rankings. There is much talk about community engagement but in essence we're sitting at an empty table. Who are we? Not sure. Where are we? Not where we should be. Where are we going? Back to free in 10!

We're going to charge a "going rate" for the dorms; we're going to increase tuition for the engineering Master's program to derive income even though the previous attempt was unsuccessful. We're putting up charges everywhere to fall in line with what everyone else is doing! At the same time, we're not doing a lot of other things! We're not looking at the enormous cost of our campus data system—inefficient and costing close to \$1M/year. We're not ...

In short, we seem to keep trying to be like everyone else and that's where we'll fail—because we are not like everyone else. When conformity becomes our norm we lose—our soul isn't built that way.

Having sat in on various board and FEC meetings, and having Laura explain facets of the financial documents, I truly appreciate the incredible amount of thinking and enormous effort that has gone into generating the FEC report.

I sat through parts of the FEC forums, most recently last Tuesday night, listening to the back-and-forth, wondering at the disconnect. For me, out of everything, emerged trust. Over the last two decades we've had so many promises from the board—none of which have been fulfilled. Agreed—it's unfair to equate this board and this administration with past occupants—but we grow tired of broken promises. 10 years is too long. There isn't an immediate urgency—an overwhelming driving force that commands engagement and commitment. Within 10 years the unconventionality that Cooper once owned will be the mantra for the conventional whilst their current conventionality will be our *modus operandi*. We'll still be charging tuition whilst everyone else is free. Will our reputation survive for 10 years or will we become just another free school?

Free in a sense that has nothing to do with money. It's watching students working together with minimal resources—each using their wits, their knowledge and their innate ability to solve a problem—all enveloped within a raw determination to succeed.

Adopting a plan for five years to free places enormous pressure on the administration, the board, the staff and the faculty. I also think it could galvanize the community and become a focal point for fundraising. We all have to understand and be able to articulate what free, as in free Cooper Union, means. We have to be able to articulate the outcomes of "free" in terms of graduates and what they will accomplish. Perhaps we have to accept that we are paying for the future of the United States and humankind; a world that believes in diversity and equality, a world that collectively accepts and embraces the enormous challenges our society faces.

Within 5 years there is talk of global temperatures exceeding the upper 1.5°C limit thought to be the turning point for *ever wilder climactic events that in turn will precipitate greater drought, habitat loss, food insecurity and mass migration*¹. Other scientists talk of catastrophic flooding in New York City every 5 years².

Within 10 years, will it even matter if The Cooper Union is free or will New York be partially underwater?

I'm NOT blaming anyone. I have no doubts that everyone in this room is invested in a successful future for the school—but, having chewed on this for a few weeks, I now believe we don't have the luxury of drifting back to free over 10 years.

Everyone connected to the operation of the school is partly responsible for answering who we are, where we are and where we are going.

If we can't answer these questions, then we're irrelevant.

Toby Cumberbatch

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/jan/31/met-office-warns-of-global-temperature-rise-exceeding-15c-limit>

² <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1703568114>