THE STATE OF THE ACADEMY

A HIGHER EDUCATION

THE NARROW, POLITICIZED IVORY TOWERS OF YESTERDAY HAVE BEEN REPLACED BY ARCHITECTURE SCHOOLS THAT VALUE DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT AND PRACTICE.

"These kids need to be taught how to put a building together—not just to make pretty pictures."

I have heard it all, and although I have great respect for these colleagues, I am genuinely dismayed at how little they seem to know about what really goes on in architecture schools today. Many of them seem stuck in the era of their own architectural education.

The 60-somethings think there isn't enough emphasis on design and technical skills. There is too much "talktecture," they say—which is probably a valid criticism of the architectural education they received in the 1960s. The 50-somethings criticize an overemphasis on formalism in architecture schools where the well-rendered façade is the sine qua non. That probably reflects more their personal experience in the 1970s than it does design studios today. Forty-somethings question a concentration on abstract imagery, architectural language, and esoteric intellectualism. They think students should be grounded in making real buildings for real people to inhabit. Thirty-somethings are concerned about the worship of shape-making and novelty in architecture schools. They feel that students are too enamored of sexy computer models and have no idea how to really put a building together.

Although I believe that academia has a responsibility to be experimental and to constantly seek new territory, I am critical of the rapid "changing of the guards" that has occurred over the past decades in architectural education. Ours is a very broad field, in which it is easy to get sucked into one or a few aspects.
and lose sight of the big picture. Focusing students too tightly on a narrow set of issues or indoctrinating them in a very specific architectural language seems wrong-headed and irresponsible. It has certainly been a downfall of architectural education in the recent past.

It was heartbreaking in the early 1990s to see graduates of top architectural programs trotting around their portfolios with beautifully stippled Prismacolor drawings of façades filled with elaborate historicist allusions, then finding the work laughably out-of-date only a few years after school. It is similarly disillusioning to see the "gobs and blobs" portfolios of a decade ago looking kind of sad and silly now.

I sincerely believe, however, that architectural education today is headed in a more durable direction—one more beneficial for students and more productive for our discipline as a whole. There seems to be a constantly increasing number of schools that view architecture as an inherently complex, multifaceted field, and believe architectural education should reflect just that. These schools are more pluralistic and less singular intellectually than their counterparts of the past few decades. There is more diversity of thought and less party line.

This conclusion comes in part from my long-standing experience as a faculty member at the School of Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin, as a former dean who has participated in endless meetings of architectural educators and administrators, and as someone who frequently lectures and serves on juries in a wide variety of academic programs. But it also comes, in particular, from intensive visits that I have made as an advisor–evaluator for five architecture programs over the past two years. These were not the "check-the-box" inquiries sponsored by NCARB for accreditation purposes, but were sincere efforts whereby each program independently solicited counsel from educators and professionals as to how they might improve themselves. The five institutions—the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); Tulane University; the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV); Louisiana State University (LSU); and the University of Michigan—are very diverse in terms of financial capacity, ranking, and geography. They constitute a pretty good representation of architectural education in the United States, public and private.

Both two- or three-day visit involved presentations; informal discussions with students, faculty, and staff; and dialogue with provosts or presidents of the universities. I was impressed in every case by the frankness of the conversations and the genuine desire for improvement.

What I took away from these experiences was a sense that architectural education in this country is rich and thriving in a wide variety of contexts. It turns out that many students can do hand drawings and physical models (which I knew very well from my own institution), and they can also represent architectural environments in an amazing variety of other media that is more sophisticated and communicative than at any other time in the history of our discipline.

They may not be taking too many classes in the business school, but they may well be participating in the Urban Land Institute's Gerald D. Hines Student Urban Design Competition, where they work on a team to solve a difficult urban problem in a way that makes economic sense and produces a healthy urban environment. Their school will very likely offer design/build opportunities where they can learn intimately "how to put a building together." They might be involved in one of the 20 Solar Decathlon teams that will construct, stick by stick (or SIP panel by SIP panel), a 1,000-square-foot sustainable house that will be rigorously tested in front of thousands of spectators on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Many programs have sophisticated community design centers like the one at LSU, where every undergraduate spends at least one semester working with clients in neighborhoods that desperately need architectural services but cannot afford professional help. Other programs, including studios at MIT, concentrate on plugging into similar authentic design situations abroad, in China, Turkey, and elsewhere. Students who participate gain personal exposure to the challenges of global architectural practice as well as to environmental problems beyond the ones we face in the United States.

Rich, mature architecture programs have a host of strengths. They offer excellent history and theory courses as well as a rigorous technical curriculum. Their faculties experiment with rapid prototyping as an alternative production means, but also construct retrofit projects with saws and measuring tapes in their own buildings. From breadth comes cross-fertilization: The education on offer is not a one-liner indoctrination, likely to become obsolete.

The human products of these comprehensive programs are extremely impressive. One graduate student at UNLV was heavily involved in research with a faculty member involving sophisticated modeling of energy performance in buildings; he also helped teach thermal fundamentals to beginning undergraduates. At the same time, he was producing design work that was beautiful, sophisticated, and immaculately detailed. Likewise, MIT undergraduates in a studio on multifamily housing were remarkably capable of synthesizing urban design concerns with a sensitivity to individual residents' needs.

There are, of course, those who cling to the notion of a school of like minds preaching a clear, distilled doctrine to be absorbed unquestioningly by impressionable young students. They point, often, to the Bauhaus as the ideal example of the well-crafted curriculum taught brilliantly by a cohesive faculty. If they could just repeat that pattern, they feel they would reach the apex of architectural education.

As it turns out, the Bauhaus was anything but that kind of singular, cohesive environment. In its most fertile era, it offered diverse points of view on a wide range of architectural topics. While Johannes Itten and Wassily Kandinsky were helping students get in touch with a mystical, spiritualist side of design, Walter Gropius was helping them understand the power of mass production. While Theo van Doesburg was emphasizing the beauties of rationalist geometry, Ludwig Hilberseimer was encouraging an efficient, nonhierarchical social fabric for the city.

I would encourage professionals to become engaged in an architecture school and discover the changes that have occurred in the past decade: Sitting on a jury or two, or going to a reunion, probably won't do the trick. It might require becoming a really active mentor to a student, learning as much from him or her as you teach. It might involve taking on interns and asking them about life outside the office. Or teaching a design studio as an adjunct faculty member.

Breadth is not an easy thing to see at a glance. More and more, though, it is the strength of American architectural education.
my latest book, and I pity the fool who did not select it. I also discuss some of my design strategies with students and colleagues and see how it could have maybe evolved. You spend more time on something, it usually gets better.

Favorite ice cream?

Cookies 'n Cream. Here's a professional development and urban design lesson derived from dessert: The higher the Oreo-to-ice-cream ratio (O:IC), the better. Dense clusters of intense-flavored cookie, followed by minimalist vanilla, dramatize the contrast, yielding the most satisfaction. Also, the skillful use of these different materials coalesces in an artful composition that touches all the senses, and the soul.

What motivated you to teach and write?

I'd like to say it was intellectual curiosity, as well as the noble idea to give something back and help students. The real reason was I needed extra cash to augment income from my fledgling young firm. But, amazingly, in spite of myself, I've been extremely fortunate to structure a situation that is sometimes quite satisfying, always difficult, and provocative.

The cyclone approach is adopted by many mavericks, because learning opportunities are everywhere and often coincide with marketing opportunities. The jaws of public committees and boards yawn for design professionals. Slots open up on award juries and convention panels. And in corners, books and magazines pile up, waiting to be explored.

The Implementation Timeline still pertains, however, for individuals who want to balance long-term goals, such as writing a book, with immediate learning opportunities. When in doubt, map it out. Then select one or two long-term professional development initiatives for dedicated pursuit, as you reserve time along the way for unanticipated chances to grow. As Pressman suggests, satisfying plus difficult plus provocative is not a bad learning environment for a design professional.

Pursuing a Career in the Academy

This is such an accurate depiction of the stages—and expectations—of an academic career in architecture that if you don’t get an anxiety attack reading it, then a tenure-track position is probably not for you.

STEPHEN D. DENT, AIA, IES, is a partner in Dent & Nordhaus, Architects, AIA, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, specializing in environmentally sensitive designs. The firm has received numerous awards and honors for their work. He is also an associate Professor of Architecture at the University of New Mexico School of Architecture and Planning. He has been teaching design studios, passive environmental controls, and lighting for over twenty years.

Assistant Professor, tenure-track, to teach design studio and an area of specialization in technology, theory, or practice issues. Teaching experience and registration preferred. Terminal degree required. Please send résumé, portfolio of representative design work, letter of intent, and three letters of rec-
ommendation to: Chair, Search Committee, School of Architecture, University X.

The above is fairly typical of, though less detailed than, most ads that architecture schools place in their required national searches for new faculty members. In rough numbers, there are about 100 accredited schools of architecture in the United States with about 2,000 full-time faculty members and about 100 open positions per year. There are a much larger number of part-time positions available, but no matter how you look at it, this is a pretty small profession. The few available full-time positions are highly prized and often receive up to several hundred applications from talented aspirants. Those doing the hiring are often amazed at the numbers of eager applicants when we think we are underpaid, underrecognized, and overworked. But when asked why we are still here, one hears comments about the intellectual stimulation, the chance to challenge oneself professionally, the rewards of working with young people who have endless potential and enthusiasm, and the love of the profession of architecture.

The student may see the job of a professor as simply that of a teacher, but the day-to-day responsibilities also include preparation for classes, meeting with and advising students, numerous meetings with other faculty and university committees, and finding time for one's own scholarly pursuits. The evaluation of a professor for tenure (i.e., a guaranteed continuing professorship at the university) is commonly in the sixth year as an assistant professor. It is typically based on two major areas (teaching and scholarship) and two areas of lesser importance (service and personal characteristics). The reality of most tenure reviews, however, is that the area of scholarship, including research, recognized creative works, and scholarly writings, is given much greater importance than the other areas. It is in this area of the tenure evaluation that your particular abilities and talents are shown as having real value relative to a peer group that extends beyond your department to a regional or national comparison. Remember, you will be hired in a national search and the university expects that you will perform at that level. You have undoubtedly heard of "publish or perish." It means that if you intend to pursue an academic career, then you will be expected to develop a recognized expertise and disseminate the results of your design, research, or theoretical explorations for peer evaluation. Accepted review or recognition may be in scholarly journals, books, conference presentations, research reports, design awards, and exhibitions. Additionally, your teaching is expected to be of high quality, you will have contributed to service in your school, the university, and the community, and you are of sound and ethical character. This is just a long and roundabout way of saying that there is more to the job than meets the eye. If you don't have the interest, inclination, or intention to develop skills beyond design studio teaching, then an academic career is an unlikely possibility.

If the real life of a Professor still appeals to you, how do you prepare for a career in academia? How do you make a good application when you see an appropriate opening? And how do you get started on the road to a successful career with a unique challenge six years ahead—your tenure review?
Preparation

First, you must acquire the appropriate terminal degree. This means the university will require a Master of Architecture degree for the more "general" positions such as described in the above ad. There are, of course, specialized positions in areas such as history, architectural research, environment and behavior, and structural or mechanical engineering that do not require design studio teaching. In many cases these positions require a PhD or doctorate, depending on university standards for similar subject areas in other departments. In the not-so-distant past, an advanced degree was not required of architecture faculty. Practical experience, especially professional prominence, was essential. Most universities today have taken the position that faculty must have at least the degree that they are offering in their program. Some exceptions are still made for extraordinary talents and special circumstances, but don't count on this.

So you are a great design student, do beautiful drawings, and get high grades. What else is needed in way of preparation? There are usually three additional concerns: teaching experience, practice (licensing is often required), and evidence of ability to teach in another specialized area. You should pursue any and all opportunities to be a teaching assistant while in school as well as part-time teaching positions after completing your degree. You will get much needed experience and find out if this is, indeed, your calling. Sometimes, the best designers aren't the best teachers, so don't be intimidated if this is what you really want to do.

By doing the best possible work you are capable of in school you will be much more likely to get a job with a quality architectural firm. No matter what school you are in—low cost state university or pricey private college—the work you do in design studio and present in your portfolio may be quickly evaluated by the person doing the hiring. When job hunting, the graduate from a more prestigious school may get the first interview, but the better skills and experience are easily recognized through reviewing a well-documented portfolio. (Interestingly, I think this simple fact has helped architecture schools avoid the extreme importance given to "brand name" schools that is evident in most professions.)

A quality firm may be defined in many ways. It may be one that is often recognized in local design award programs, one that has a good reputation among other architects for highly competent professional work, or one that does work that is exciting to you. Experience in the many firms that fit in this category is much more valuable in your professional growth than experience in firms that are complacent and care little about pushing their "edges."

If possible, get some experience in a "name" firm, as they often provide a unique outlook, get important commissions, and are participants in significant design competitions. All of this is a great learning experience and draws attention to your resume. And get your license! You cannot legally call yourself an architect unless you have passed the architectural licensing examination. Teaching architectural design without this validation (however one might question the test's relevance) puts one in a weak position in the academy and with your peers and students.
Perhaps of greatest difficulty and confusion for the aspiring professor is the need to develop an area of specialization. For some this is not an issue as they obtain specialized advanced degrees in history, engineering, psychology, landscape architecture, and so on, but for the future studio critic what are the options? Looking at our studio faculty I see the following specialties: programming, professional practice, beginning design, design applications for computing, energy and lighting, construction, technics, design theory, presentation graphics, urban design, and housing, among others. This additional expertise may come from a specialty in graduate work, by professional practice and employment, or by individual interest and study—or some combination of the above. In any case, having additional skills will greatly expand your employability either in practice or the academy.

Application for Teaching Positions

When you respond to an ad from a particular school you must meet all of the requirements and be on time. Many universities have quite specific procedures and are guided by detailed affirmative action policies. Make sure that you tailor your application to the needs of the school that you apply to. We receive numerous applications that are so general that we are not even sure the applicant has read our ad. For example, if the search is for a teacher of beginning design and you feel you are qualified, address your letter of intent to those issues specific to beginning students, your approach to teaching at that level, and expand your resume and portfolio so that your experience in that area is clear.

A few comments about portfolios are in order at this point. Make sure that for each project shown you state the title, give a succinct project description (especially if it is needed to understand more abstract assignments), where and when completed (which design studio or office and date), and, for professional work or team projects in studio, state your role in the development of the project. Without the above information, it is often difficult to deduce responsibility for work, development of skills over time, or even what the intentions were for the work—all of which is critical for its evaluation. I also suggest that you submit a portfolio that shows your full range of skills as they apply to the position at hand. You may want to include: slides of student work completed under your direction; samples of student assignments or programs you have written; examples of design sketches, concept diagrams, design details, construction drawings, and process sketches, and especially papers, research reports, or other evidence from your academic area of specialization.

The portfolio needn’t be overly produced. Generally, the “precious” or overdone portfolios I have seen tend to obscure the work itself or attempt to hide the relative lack of experience of the applicant. Also, the portfolio should not be too long or too short. This is a little harder to define, but put yourself in the reviewers’ shoes and think about going through a hundred or more portfolios. Maybe then you’ll edit your portfolio to the essential information that conveys your strengths and abilities to best advantage.

Resumes should be clear, concise, and clearly state your experience and responsibilities. Give starting and ending dates (by month) of employment.
and education. Make it clear if you did or did not receive a degree. Have you completed your licensing exam? Or the internship? One would think that the need for such basic information would be obvious, but after reviewing hundreds of applications, I can tell you that I am often unable to ascertain such essential facts. I truly appreciate a beautiful graphic layout and the effort it took to create, but the information must be there first. (Come to think of it, that’s a pretty good way to look at the design work, too.)

Letters of recommendation, when required, should come from people who can truly evaluate your abilities relative to the specific position for which you are applying. General letters are not nearly as effective as letters that address the nature of the advertised position and your capabilities to perform well in it. This also shows that you have talked to the recommender and discussed the position at hand.

Finally, a reminder: the completed package almost always has to be received on time or you application will be disqualified.

Getting Started

Now that you have been offered the position, how do get started on the road to success? As an administrator, maybe I shouldn’t give away too much, but as a faculty member I must advise you that before you even start to work there is the critical issue of a contract. You must negotiate as good a deal for yourself as possible at this time. Once you are in the university system there are only two promotions (from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor and from Associate Professor to Professor) and seldom are any significant funds available for merit raises. So, where you start is where you will be for a while in financial terms relative to your fellow faculty members. If you have especially strong skills or experience, or if the school is pursuing you, then use these factors to negotiate from a position of strength. If you have taught for several years and move to another school, make sure you are given this credit in your initial contract. But be aware that your tenure review will come in your sixth year, and the tenure documentation will be required of you in the fall of that year. Therefore, you really only have five years to prepare and if you get credit for previous teaching, you will have even less time at your new school. Somehow that time flies and the numerous responsibilities of professorship will eat up that time like a rapacious Pacman.

The other major issue in the negotiation of a contract is the definition of your duties. You should be totally clear about the number of courses and credit hours that you will be responsible for, the expectations for your service and committee work, and understand fully the school’s requirements relative to scholarly and creative work leading to tenure. This “package” must be reasonable and fair for both parties and must be negotiated at the benefit of both. If the expectations of either party are unrealistic, there is trouble ahead.

Once you have signed a contract and settle in your new position, I have several suggestions. First and foremost, be well prepared and thoroughly organized for your classes. I hope you kept notes, outlines, and syllabi from
classes that you have taken or taught and don’t be shy about requesting them from other faculty, as many will be very helpful. Don’t, however, hesitate to incorporate your own ideas on the topic or on class organization or assignments. Remember, you are a professor, and it is expected that you have a viewpoint to profess.

Next, you should have a mentor. Many schools will assign a senior faculty member as an advisor or mentor to you; if not, you may choose to develop a mentorship relationship on your own. This voice of experience may advise you on everything from departmental politics (never have so many made such ado about so little), to grant writing, teaching evaluations, tenure strategies, and how to manage or control your ever-growing committee responsibilities.

Of most difficulty for the new professor is the need to develop a reasonable level of expertise and a publishing record in his or her specialty in five years. Grants may be difficult to obtain, research funds in architecture are less than plentiful, outside design work may be less available or more mundane in potential than you have been used to, and the time to complete your other tasks at the university is more than you estimated. No matter what the reasons, at the tenure review there is only the bottom line—so get started as early as possible. You must balance your efforts to be a good classroom teacher with your development of your academic specialty. These are the primary areas of evaluation at your tenure review, and you can’t ignore one or the other. Your mentor can help you in preparing yourself in both areas. There will be a formal midtenure review in the third year of your contract. It is usually very tough and very useful. Listen, learn, and respond to it with help and advice from your mentor and fellow faculty members.

The last bit of advice I can give may be the most obvious and the most useful. You are there for the students and for the advancement of knowledge. The university expects both; you should demand no less of yourself.

Out of the Swamp, or the Evolution of a Career

I could not imagine a more appropriate, timely, and humorous addition to this chapter than Charles Linn’s story of his trek from architect to editor of the top professional journal in the field.

CHARLES D. LINN, FAIA, is Senior Editor of Architectural Record. In addition to writing design features and essays, he occasionally pens cartoons and takes photographs for the magazine.

Evolutionary theory teaches that those creatures who can change, or adapt to change, are the most likely to survive. In modern times if a job is driving someone to extinction, changing careers may be the best path to thwarting evolutionary disaster, if the subject can stand it. After finding that I had become nearsighted after eight years of drawing architectural details and that my spine was taking on a permanent curve from being constantly hunched...