A n emotional, often-painful clash is taking place at architectural schools across the country amid growing doubts over whether the traditional educational environment is preparing students for a rapidly changing world outside. A number of schools have made valiant progress in connecting what they teach to the diverse communities they serve. And at its best, the design studio is getting long overdue recognition on some campuses as a model of excellent learning.

Still, at the very moment when the profession badly needs more flexible, worldly, empathetic, and diverse graduates, too many schools remain wedded to shopworn traditions and curricula that glorify a single model of architect-as-designer, give short shrift to liberal studies, offer only brief nods to non-Western history and theory, neglect the rich potential of computer technology, and stress competition far more than teamwork.

Visits to numerous campuses, discussions with scores of students, educators, regulators, and practitioners, as well as an examination of a dozen accreditation reports prepared during the 1996 academic year, have convinced me that while the focus of the debate over architectural education has often been on the bitter divisions between schools and the world of practice, the more alarming gap is the one dividing both schools and the profession from the needs of the public which architecture could so effectively address.

The time has come for educators and practicing architects to close ranks around addressing four of architecture education’s toughest challenges, each essential to the goals of leading the profession to a future of greater relevance and responsibility.

**Use computers to connect students to a world of viewpoints**
If there’s a single symbol of the clash between past and future in architecture education, it’s the computer.

The struggle, or at least one aspect of it, plays out each day at student Wes Harp’s studio workstation at Mississippi State University’s School of Architecture. Recently, Wes was designing an observation

Lee Mitgang was a senior fellow at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching from 1993 to April, 1997. He is co-author with the late Ernest L. Boyer of the 1996 Carnegie Foundation report Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice.
At Ball State University, for example, David Mackey, who teaches a fourth-year electronic design studio, says his students use the Internet to identify and contact “remote critics”—architects around the world who are experts in the knowledge area of projects in which they’re working. Students display their designs on their own home pages, and “remote critics” from as far away as Italy send critiques by e-mail. One result: Mackey’s own role as sole authority over student work has been transformed.

“Suddenly,” says Mackey, “there are more than fifteen critics in the studio. As a teacher, I become a facilitator and fellow learner rather than the only expert. We can now run a global design studio which also has implications from a cultural point of view. The student is no longer presented with a single linear path to design.”

Such changes aren’t just cosmetic. Last spring, students in Mackey’s class entered a competition sponsored by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) to design a “hotel of the future,” and his students won two of the six prizes.

It’s time—indeed, past time—for more schools and faculty to join the computer revolution with both feet. Along with their impact on making design a more integrative process, computers, as tools of information, communication and analysis, can open studies as never before to the concerns and perspectives of communities around the world.

End apartheid in architecture schools

Martin Moeller, executive director of ACSA, recalls a recent “architecture career day” at a public school on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. “The student body at the school was mixed, but the program drew an overwhelmingly white crowd. A good mix of boys and girls, but in terms of race, it was astonishing,” Moeller said.

The race record of architecture education is a continuing disgrace, and if anything, things seem to be worsening. In 1992, there were 2,172 African-American architectural students, 5.9 percent of the national total. By 1996, the number had actually dropped to 2,018, or 5.4 percent. Just 3.2 percent of all architecture faculty—123—were African-American. Of those, 40 in the entire nation were tenured. Put bluntly, it’s hard to imagine that this profession can ever lay claim to leadership in shaping the built environment when it remains so unreflective of late 20th-century America.

Over the years, individual faculty, many now graying veterans of the civil rights era, have carried on lonely battles to make their schools more welcoming to minority students. Lately, the thinking seems to be that a more inclusive curriculum is key: adding non-Western perspectives, promoting scholarship aimed at documenting how persons of color have shaped architecture here and abroad, and offering more studios that connect architecture to community concerns.

Many such efforts have been documented by Sherry Ahrentzen of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in a new ACSA publication, Doing Diversity. Kathryn Anthony, for example, teaches “Gender and Race in Contemporary Architecture” at the University of Illinois. “The American City Since 1940: Class, Race, Gender, Culture, Space,” is taught by Thomas Dutton at Miami University in Ohio. “Asian-American and African-American Environments” is offered at California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo by...
architectural critic at The Arizona Republic. Several others are involved in television programs about architecture, while others serve on commissions that shape projects both on and off campus.

To renew architecture schools, then, the answer lies not in meat-axe solutions aimed at banishing unlicensed faculty, but in a more rational approach. The keys to ensure that teachers can really teach, that teachers are appropriately placed in their areas of strength, and that what is taught is firmly grounded in the notion of service to the profession and the public.

Connect learning to life

The most essential challenge is to change the content and culture of studies to prepare graduates to practice competently, as well as to lead the profession to a broader definition of its ideals.

Here, there's reason for optimism. A growing list of schools and individual faculty have lately done inspiring work in connecting studies to community concerns, and in producing meaningful research from those experiences.

The Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-ARC) in Los Angeles, for example, now requires all students to work on community-based projects developed by its newly formed City Practice + Research Center (CPR). Besides giving students the experience of direct involvement with a variety of community-design problems, the goal is to develop a community clearinghouse for design research. The CPR curriculum has students designing public housing for people with AIDS, teaching high school workshops in collaboration with the Esperanza Housing group in an impoverished Los Angeles neighborhood, and designing a meditative garden at the Veterans Administration Hospital in West Los Angeles.

At the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark, Professor Leslie Kanes Weisman's "service learning studios" offer as clear an example as any of how community-oriented design studios can transform the outlook of both future architects and clients. Her studios have had students designing housing for AIDS children in Newark. They have also worked on designing sustainable buildings for the Grail Community, a Christian society in Cornwall-on-Hudson, N.Y., dedicated to empowering women globally and promoting environmental justice.

From the first day of class, students learn that Weisman's studios are dramatically different. Instead of students simply claiming work space, Weisman challenges them to think together as a team about how available studio space ought to be used to fit functions.

"I sit everybody down and tell them we are doing a 'design research collaborative.' We need conference space. We need a model-making area. We need community space. So I ask them to measure the room and come back with a floor plan. We make decisions by consensus, and then we look for good, refined ideas. We come up with a composite and proceed to build it. Only after we determine who in the class is going to do what, do students claim space. Students learn that cooperation doesn't have to stifle individual creativity. At the epicenter of this is a sharing of power."

As projects proceed, work and research are evaluated by the group as a whole in terms of its value in solving the problems of the client. Weisman also calls upon students to evaluate their own work:

"Did you meet your own criteria? Was this a valuable educational experience for you?"

Jason Klimowski, a student in the Grail studio in 1994 who now works in a Newark firm specializing in historic preservation, said his experience in Weisman's studio is still paying dividends. "The research we did then is still valuable to me. We had to learn how to present our ideas to groups, how to speak publicly, and how to meet with real rather than theoretical clients."

The clients of Weisman's studios, for their part, say the experience changed their attitudes about architects: "The design work the students did on housing for us was excellent, very creative," says Peg Linnehan, a member of the Grail Community. "I never worked with an architect before, and all I had was the stereotype of someone who is very technical, and that I would have to understand the lingo. I did not expect that an architect would be interested in knowing what we were about."

Says Prof. Weisman, "Students need to see the optimism in communities, the intelligence in communities, and the desire to solve their problems. Architecture students can play an important role in this: providing models of what could be."

Diana LeFevre, who took Weisman's AIDS studio and is now in private practice in Hunterdon County, N.J., said the experience was crucial to her professional outlook. "The day we went to see the kids with AIDS was probably the most difficult and powerful day I've had in architecture," she said. "It was the best way to end my school career. If I could find a job that would bring me half as much fulfillment, that's what I'm seeking in my professional life."

Four challenges and more

These four challenges—using computers to open studios to a world of different viewpoints, increasing racial and ethnic diversity, putting greater value on teaching, and connecting learning to life and community needs—are certainly not the only ones facing architecture schools. But they are among the most nettlesome and, in several cases, the most chronically neglected. Yet each holds the promise of helping to create a profession more accessible and empathetic to a far broader public and clientele. Above all, each challenge offers schools the opportunity to lead the way in affirming that the spirit of competent service to communities, as well as to clients, must define the soul of architecture if the profession is to thrive in the years ahead.

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Christopher Yip and Brad Grant (who has since moved on to historically black Hampton University).

Nonetheless, with only tepid support from the profession, and with recent anti-affirmative action federal court rulings clouding the picture even further, schools of architecture are throwing a party to which few in the minority community are likely to come any time soon. In the short run, the number of African-American students will probably remain tiny and concentrated mainly in historically black institutions and a handful of urban public institutions.

Says Prof. Ahrentzen: “Unless there’s a concerted effort—more than just one or two committed people in a department—I see things continuing to dwindle. Why should it be any different?”

What can be done to reverse this pattern of ineffectiveness? On campuses, the first steps must be taken by university administrators who have an obligation to provide resources for faculty and student recruitment. Presidents, provosts, and deans also have to ensure that campus rewards and priorities work for, and not against, the goal of diversity.

“I’ve given every dean on campus a blank check to hire minority faculty,” said Dr. Derek Hodgson, provost of Mississippi State, a school that seems as sincere as any in wanting to issue a welcome to people of color. But his school also illustrates how tough the obstacles can be. Not only is it hard to find African-American faculty for the architecture program, says Hodgson, it’s even harder to find persons of color willing to relocate to Mississippi.

Even when the will is there, the goal of diversity often collides with other priorities in competing for scarce resources. Said Dr. Melvin Ray, Mississippi State’s vice president for research: “Let’s say that as a dean, I have to decide whether to spend money to send a faculty member to a conference, or spend money recruiting for African-American students in Jackson, or make a generous offer to recruit an African-American faculty member. That’s a tough decision. Which decision is going to get the greatest support from faculty and others internally?”

Beyond campuses, the challenge is to change the remote image of architecture in African-American communities—and few people understand this better than Rodner Wright. In 1994, Wright held the shocking distinction of being the only licensed African-American architect living in Mississippi. Last August, he left to become dean of Florida A&M’s architecture program.

The architecture profession has no real presence in most African-American communities, Wright says. And in such communities, there’s little sense that residents have any influence over the long-range planning of their built environment. Lacking political or economic power, African-American communities tend to view the built environment as a fact of life beyond their influence, controlled by government or outside developers and profiteers.

“The nature of the profession promotes the idea that it mainly about signature architecture by signature architects, opposed to urban planning and development of the total community says Wright. “So if you’re a young kid thinking about being in a profession in your community, you don’t necessarily see where architect might fit in.”

All of which points to a desperate need for members of the profession and schools of architecture to step up their efforts to ensure that knowledge of the built environment, and architecture’s role in shaping it, is a basic part of elementary and secondary education. The American Architectural Foundation, among others, has been trying for years to expose younger students to architecture, but those efforts, to date, have only scratched the surface of the problem.

The failure to raise the status of architecture in the African-American community is especially short-sighted. In years to come, notes Wright, America’s population, and hence the potential client base for architects, will include many more persons of color.

If schools and the profession have been unmoved by their better angels to make diversity a top priority, perhaps they’ll awaken to the profits to be made, and new markets to be tapped, in bringing more minority youngsters into the architecture field.

**Make excellent teaching a top priority**

Among those who blame architecture schools for being lost in the blue yonder of theory and design, and deaf to the day-to-day concerns of the profession, architecture teachers make tempting targets.

Such critics often wonder out loud whether it makes sense that fewer than half of the nation’s 4,000 full- and part-time faculty hold architectural licenses, according to data kept by the National Architectural Accrediting Board, Inc.

Those alert for even darker conspiracies note that large numbers of faculty earned their last degrees from nine elite universities, most of which are labeled, with widely varying degrees of accuracy, as “theoretical” as opposed to “practice-oriented.” An unscientific count does, indeed, indicate that in 1996, roughly 40 percent of the nation’s architecture faculty earned their last academic or professional degrees from a small cluster of Ivy or elite schools. From there, it’s only a small leap to imagining that these elite-trained teachers, like the science-fiction “pod people” from “Invasion of The Body Snatchers,” are a monolithic force spreading their dreary, impractical ideas to schools around the country.

One antidote being discussed lately in some professional and regulatory circles is to require that most or all faculty, especially those teaching design, be licensed architects. One school, Montana State University, actually took that step more than a decade ago for virtually all faculty except historians. Clark Llewellyn, the school’s director, claims that the resulting strong professional orientation of his program has meant that more than 90 percent of graduates over the last 10 years have found jobs in the architecture field—far more than at most schools.

Critics are right, in one sense, to focus on faculty. Too often, in discussions about how to improve education, the quality of teaching is shockingly neglected. Still, the near-McCarthyite preoccupation with
the professional or academic backgrounds of faculty badly misses the point, and could create greater mischief by arbitrarily eliminating many able studio teachers, eroding the already-weak research capabilities of architecture faculties, and endangering the diversity of faculty, which is one of architecture education's greatest strengths. Above all, it ignores the reality that while the profession may be the most important constituent of architecture schools, it is not the only one. Many students will never design buildings, and so faculty have to be equipped to educate for a variety of careers.

"I don't think a faculty member who teaches design should have to be licensed," said Gregory Hunt, dean of Catholic University's School of Architecture and Planning. "I've seen faculty who have never built a room who are outstanding as teachers."

"The profession is thinking narrowly," agreed Kent Hubbell, chair of the architecture department at Cornell University, one of the Ivy League schools which graduates a large number of future architecture teachers. "In the end, the good school is a mixture of all the above—practitioners and scholars."

The focus for renewing teaching should be on creating a more capacious academic and scholarly climate on campus that encourages professional faculty to have a better balance of backgrounds, including practical experience and Ph.D.'s. It's up to administrators to establish a harmonious atmosphere in which diverse faculty can coexist and learn from each other's strengths and experiences, rather than becoming factionalized. Schools like the University of Oregon have helped set the stage for more collegiality by requiring faculty to teach both studio and lecture courses.

Schools also should get more serious about supporting teaching ability—rewarding excellent teachers with tenure and promotions, and remedying it where weak. In a comprehensive survey in 1994 conducted by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, nearly 60 percent of architecture faculty agreed that their schools would benefit from sustained teacher training.

"Teachers should have a professional understanding of what they teach. But the fundamental issue is, here's the range of stuff we need to teach. Is the faculty qualified to teach it?" said Jerry Finrow, the dean of the University of Washington's architecture program.

Finrow added that a key is placing the right faculty in appropriate studio levels. For example, lively teaching skills may be more important than licensure as a qualification for teaching beginning studios. "In beginning studios, faculty should be extremely good at instilling enthusiasm and helping students make the transition to young designers. A stiff guy in a beginning studio is a disaster."

Finally, and most essentially, teachers must serve as models for connecting learning to the larger purposes of the profession and communities. A program that encourages faculty to be community activists is Arizona State University. One member of the faculty is the