Social impact

As architecture education faces a shift, how will our communities fit in?

By Kathleen M. O'Donnell, February 15, 2019

ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS FROM ILLINOIS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY WORK ON A SIGNAGE DESIGN FOR CHICAGO'S UPTOWN BABTIST CHURCH AS PART OF THEIR AIAS CHAPTER'S FREEDOM BY DESIGN PROGRAM.

Students, educators, and architects are calling for a stronger connection with communities and with each other

Participatory design isn't a new concept, but it is experiencing a resurgence. As architects increasingly seek to lead in their communities—communities facing challenges of rapid urbanization and climate change—it's more important than ever to engage all stakeholders in the design process. But how does participatory design, with all its benefits for communities and architects alike, come to be learned?

According to Justin Ferguson, AIA, PhD, assistant dean of Ball State University's College of Architecture and Planning, a variety of factors drive both the practice and the instruction of architecture. He says that the 1960s and 1970s saw community-based design being championed by practice and education alike, partly brought on by social justice movements of the era and more specifically, Whitney Young's 1968 address to the AIA. Ferguson, whose doctoral dissertation explored methods of participatory design, notes that economic forces in more recent decades like the Wall Street boom of the 1980s spurred the profession and academy to go in somewhat different directions. Practice began to prioritize corporate design, leading to a wider developer-based focus later on. "In academia, you had some people that were more on the social end of architecture doing and writing about such work, but there was a disconnect between that and what was happening in the professional realm at that time," he says.

At a recent AIA Regional and Urban Design Committee (RUDC) symposium called "Mind the Gap," design educators and architects, urban planners, and landscape architects came together to discuss the divide still permeating education and practice. Some speakers talked of their work at community design centers that partner with nonprofit organizations and municipalities, while others described studios at universities and in firms that connect students with a variety of stakeholders to design public projects. While approaches to engagement varied depending on each speaker's school and practice, there was a general consensus that community projects are enhancing students' educational experiences and improving communities at the same time.

Emerging professionals seek impact

"For some reason, architectural education has never really picked up the mantel of how engaging with the community or client can inform the way we approach design," says Laura Weiss, Assoc. AIA. As an adjunct professor at California College of the Arts and a private leadership coach, she's seen a rise of interest in community engagement over the last decade or so, largely inspired by the demands of young people.

"One of the characteristics of the millennial generation is the desire to have some kind of social impact," Weiss adds. "They really want to make sure that everything they're doing is doing good in the world. It's no surprise that this is coming up in architecture programs." Ferguson has noticed it, too. "Students are hungry for this type of work," he says.

Whether or not a school of architecture and design includes curricula tied to participatory design often comes down to the larger college or university. The 2006 introduction of the elective Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, which benchmarks colleges and universities advancing education through local and global initiatives, may have compelled more institutions to integrate community engagement into their programs, or at least think more critically about the important role they have in their communities. Ferguson, who also serves as executive director of the school's new

entire college" and that the Carnegie Classification is helpful to the school's administrators because it indicates how they demonstrate service and act a resource in Indiana. By 2015, 361 institutions representing 33 states and US territories were selected to receive the classification.

"Students are hungry for this type of work." -Justin Ferguson, AIA

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) conducted research in 2014—with assistance from the AIA Housing and Community Development Knowledge Community—to understand exactly how many colleges have embraced community design. Among the programs they profiled is the now well-known Rural Studio at Auburn University, the discovery of which Ferguson credits as a turning point that led him down his research and career path. Speakers at "Mind the Gap" represented other programs present in the ACSA research including the University of Arkansas Community Design Center, the University of South Florida's Florida Center for Community Design and Research, and Carnegie Mellon's Remaking Cities Institute. At ACSA's count, more than 150 community design programs—the vast majority of which are affiliated with a college or university—connect students and designers to work on community participation projects nationwide.

Despite a broad trend toward emphasizing community engagement and building programs to facilitate it, the level of support students and educators receive within architecture programs varies. Some design programs engage students in participatory design work over the full course of their education, while other schools may offer a single design studio in a professional degree program, if at all. Having been affiliated with four schools of architecture and/or planning in his career, Ferguson has frequently found that the commitment within an architecture program depends on who is leading it. "It comes a lot from the history of the programs, who was there, and what came out of it," he says.

Accreditation review sparks new opportunities

As the profession and academy gear up for the National Architecture Accreditation Board's Accreditation Review Forum (ARF) this summer, architects are investigating how curricula can meet the needs of a changing profession.

An AIA Strategic Council working group conducted workshops in 2018 with students, educators, and practitioners so they could learn what each group feels is needed to transform architectural education and provide guidance for the ARF. They found, unsurprisingly, that students and emerging professionals want an education relevant to societal needs and interdisciplinary in nature. Mid-to-late career practitioners identified a need for adaptable minds, ready to flex a variety of skillsets in the workplace. Weiss, who led the working group, believes that these two things go hand in hand.

"Architects really have to engage with a wide variety of stakeholders on a project," she says, indicating that what some refer to as "soft skills" like communication, collaboration, and engagement provide the

there's a latent—and sometimes an articulated—desire for building those skills into education," she says, describing her hope that curricula will grow to fully support community engagement while ensuring that the next generation is prepared to enter the workforce.

Whether their curricula include participatory design or not, passionate students often find ways to engage outside of the classroom, building the skills Weiss sees as critical for success in the field. Adam Fogel became involved with Freedom by Design, the nationwide program of the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS), during his undergraduate education at the University of Texas at Arlington. Inspired by the hands-on building experience and collaboration with local organizations that the projects offered, he's found immense professional growth and personal satisfaction through community design work.

"Seeing how simple it is to change someone's life for the better—that's always something we should promote more in architecture school and design school in general," he says. This summer, after finishing his Master of Architecture degree at Illinois Institute of Technology and having served as a Freedom by Design leader for years, Fogel will assume the role of AIAS national vice president. He plans to continue strengthening the connection between communities and architecture schools so other students will have the opportunity to learn while making an impact.

Fogel, Ferguson, AIA Strategic Council members like Weiss, and RUDC symposium participants share a common viewpoint: community engagement is essential to preparing the next generation of architects *and* creating an equitable built environment. Input from people who ultimately use spaces— and dedicated collaboration with them—can become a mainstay in the practice of architecture if it's supported in school. "Designers don't make places, people do," Ferguson says. "Education has to teach that."

Learn more about AIA's higher education efforts as well as our Center for Communities by Design and public awareness campaign, Blueprint for Better.

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