

Affecting Change in Architecture Education

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I am impressed but not surprised at how differently Tom, Richard and I view the question of “affecting change in architectural education.” Tom took on the more expansive issue of how the broader university might re-define itself through “design thinking” and “design thinkers” leadership, while Richard gave a concise overview of long held aspirations for architectural education and the profession. And I took on architecture’s relationship to society, particularly concerned with “massive societal changes.” All of us, however, appear to have faith in architecture’s ability, using Richard’s words, to “make a difference.” It seems to me that relying on past and even present architecture education models is not the best strategy.

We cannot affect change by maintaining an all too safe distance from the entirety of the people who live in the U.S. let alone the rest of the planet. We cannot influence change by waiting to respond to universities’, communities’ and governments’ demands, or when conditions become so bad that they become a threat. Change leaders identify and act on challenges before they become crises. And we cannot expect always to be leaders. A participant is a meaningful position as well. And we cannot impact societal challenges by sitting in an ivory tower or in the comfort of people who are like us. Nor can our students.

To educate our students about how to make a difference, we need to prepare them with a clear ethical stance. We need to give them knowledge about the relationship between architecture and its societal context. And we need to get them out of the classroom and out of the university, into unfamiliar contexts to unravel their predilections to particular problem definitions and solutions. And I don’t want to stop here. Architects would benefit as well by ‘continuing education’ experiences offering deep engagement with unfamiliar people and communities at risk from massive societal changes. And can you imagine all of difference we could make.

Can We Do the Right Thing

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Change is both pervasive and evasive. In architectural education, evasive may arguably dominate. Although many aspects of change (or the potential therefore) might serve as a basis for this discussion, change to mitigate the negative environmental impacts of buildings will be selected as a case in point. There may be no single issue of greater long-term impact facing architectural education and the professions it serves.

We are at an interesting point in the trajectory that is architectural education. Owners are increasingly requesting or demanding green projects. The design professions are edgily starting to worry about climate change. A movement toward net-zero-energy buildings is afoot. Concern for carbon-neutral projects is on the horizon. The economy is currently in shambles, leading to trepidation among practicing architects and graduating students alike. These are surely interesting times; times hypothetically worthy of change. And yet—if these are indeed interesting (and challenging) times for the design professions—the proof of such a proposition will not be found from observation of broad-based trends in architectural education.

Ed Mazria, in his in-your-face 2003 article “It’s the Architecture, Stupid,” brought the connection between buildings and climate change into sharp focus. Such focus might well have provided the needed impetus for change. But did it? Upon exiting “The 2010 Imperative: A Global Emergency Teach-In” (broadcast in 2007), change truly did seem imperative. Yet, amazingly few schools have signed onto the Architecture 2010 Imperative, an opportunity to begin to effect change (even if only verbally). Why have so many schools not supported this declaration of intention to do the right thing? Or was this the wrong thing to do? Do we, collectively as a profession, not know what the right thing is? If not, how do we decide?

We need to do the right thing. And, relative to climate change, we need to do it soon and wholeheartedly. But what does this mean? Have architecture schools been doing the wrong thing for the past fifty years? If so, has this been accidental or intentional? Surely no school of architecture has with malice aforethought deemed it appropriate to ignore the climate change imperative. But does it really matter whether the wrong thing is done by intent or default—by wrong action or by inaction?