Education And Relevance

Regardless of how unrelated the fields may be, every phase of education from pre-school to graduate study is under close scrutiny today. Everyone faces the same problem initially – that of theory versus practice. In these times, however, education problems are compounded because people must not only be equipped technically for a profession, they must be conditioned to adapt psychologically and professionally to a world that will in all probability change many times in their respective lifetimes. Architecture is by no means an exception.

In a recent book, Comprehensive Architecture Services, General Principles and Practice, prepared by The American Institute of Architects, Robert W. McLaughlin, FAIA, gave a candid evaluation of what he feels are the main issues in architectural education today and some insight into what the possible solutions may be. Regardless of whether one agrees with him or not, his comments are most interesting and provocative.

Broad Program

To begin with, McLaughlin recommended a complete re-structuring of architectural education utilizing a program similar to the one used by the medical and law professions today. This would provide for a broad program leading to a BA or BS in the liberal arts and sciences field followed by a specialized degree in architecture. He readily acknowledged that architectural students face one disadvantage that medical and law students don't encounter, curricula being parallel. This is a problem they are facing now, too. However, lawyers are equipped from grammar school in English usage, which is a primary tool for their trade. Most future doctors prep in high school biology and chemistry labs. But, few architectural candidates receive a solid chance in their formative years to develop the awareness and visual representation through means such as drawing that are so essential to an architectural student.

Introducing the analytical study of architecture as a part of the college liberal arts and sciences program, would be beneficial to a future architect in many different ways on the undergraduate level. Initially, it would prepare him for a future in architecture much the same way studying literature aids a writer. Then, it would lay the groundwork for his more advanced professional studies which would come after a bachelor degree. Through the broad spectrum electives open in the arts and sciences field, it would give him the opportunity to examine other related facets of life he will have to basically understand if he is to be a successful professional. Whereas, undergraduate school on these terms would prepare him to have the breadth to adjust to the wide scope of architecture today, the graduate professional curriculum would provide the future architect with the depth, precision and knowledge of forces, materials and techniques to meet the demands of his occupation.

Take Electives

A fringe benefit of having architecture incorporated into the university arts and sciences program is it would enable the non-architect student to take courses in this field as electives. This would not only give these students a basic appreciation of architecture, it would better prepare them as future clients and members of zoning, planning and other civic boards.

After graduate school and an official degree in architecture, McLaughlin felt a post-graduate program based on specialized fields (much the same as specialties for doctors) would be advantageous. These fields would be for people who want to become experts in any of the particular areas in architecture such as environmental controls, urban planning, structures or building organization.

Though he couldn't deny implementation of his ideas would be difficult, McLaughlin said, "We have fought successfully to limit, legally and technically, the use of the term "architect" to members of our profession. Now, we need to expand the capabilities of the profession to serve widely as architects. In fact, we have got to advance as a real profession that aims to serve, if we are to have professional schools that will train for the new role of the architect that we hope for."

Scholastic Approach

Whether McLaughlin's ideas are the solution or not is, of course, debatable in architectural education circles. The important point is that authorities in the field are willing to conscientiously and objectively try to analyze the scholastic approach to the field in the hope of presenting ideas that will enable architecture to be as relevant as possible to the demands of modern times. Progress has always been based on the willingness of man to evaluate present conditions and to have the courage to make innovations that will improve it. It's too early to say what the outcome of such speculation will be in the future, but borrowing from Plato who said "the direction in which education starts a man will determine his future in life," architects the nation over are collaborating to assure that the education received by architectural students today will enable them to give the fullest service possible to society.