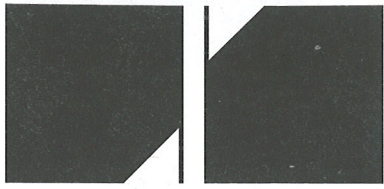


nov/dec 2010



architecture
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TRIBUTE

Bruce Rickard (1929-2010)

OPINION

Priorities in educating architects

Q&A

University heads of program

STUDIO WORK

Focus on transport and drawing

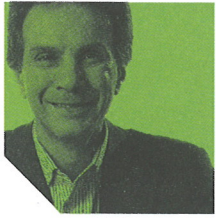
AWARD SEASON

Country, Lower Hunter, Randwick

All theory, no practice?

Current perspectives on architectural education





Alec Tzannes

educating architects

What is the best education for architects? This is usually a hot topic not only in the profession but also, not surprisingly, within the architecture discipline at universities. Two recent substantial studies of learning and teaching¹ have been published as evidence of the focus on this topic in tertiary education.

My brief observations are in the context of less than two years as Dean, University of NSW Built Environment, working in a team that is reviewing and developing the faculty curriculum.

A key ingredient to any valued educational experience is maintaining student engagement; this is often expressed in terms of achieving a student experience that inspires learning through relevant courses with vibrant, inspirational lectures (delivered live or online), seminars, field trips and studios. Not to be underestimated is the positive impact of ‘non-programmed’ learning through social experiences with a university connection. Student-to-student learning through campus life or other shared student activities — including the use of electronic media, for example Facebook, Twitter, and student blog sites — is an important aspect of the contemporary student experience. So, too, is learning by working, or ‘service learning’ as it is sometimes called, which is best structured in partnership with a university, but also often useful when done through part-time work.

Balancing the development of intellectual and practical skills is a critical component of any curriculum design. Determining the focus of five important years of full-time education that underpins future careers, and architecture as a discipline, is challenging and often controversial. Students seem reasonably accepting of, and committed to, the concept that learning is a lifelong experience, and recognise the special nature of their time at university.

High on my list of core educational aspirations is the development of ‘critical thinking’: the ability to be discerning, to apply knowledge with rigour and to understand the value of evidence-based research to guide

argument and decision-making processes.

Equally important is the development of a parallel skill that is referred to in many ways, and that I will label ‘design thinking’. Design thinking is often undertaken in a design studio learning environment. For me, the design studio remains the heart of the architectural curriculum. Good design studios underpin an attractive and effective architecture degree program.

Design thinking involves the development of practical and intellectual skills grounded in the history and theory of architecture. The themes and learning objectives of studio projects must ensure a reasonably complete coverage and progressive development of architectural design skills. Design thinking is best considered from a global perspective with a strong case for a significant percentage of studio problems modelled on real projects and sites, using, in our case, Sydney as a ‘design/design-research laboratory’. Connecting

“...the design studio remains the heart of the architectural curriculum.”

students to academics with research interests and to leading practitioners, sometimes as dual ‘studio masters’, is a direction worth pursuing.

To strengthen the integration of leading practice within university, I favour professorial-level fractional appointments from practice on fixed terms. By being members of the permanent academic staff, these appointments are more influential, enriching the faculty with practice experience at the highest level and applying this knowledge, in collaboration with full-time academics, to the development of the curriculum. This approach to architectural education is reasonably well thought out in the US, and comparable to medical education in Australia where there is much more effective integration of leading practice with leading research, learning and teaching.

Differentiating undergraduate (typically, the first three-year degree program) and postgraduate learning experiences is also important. For example, at undergraduate level students more commonly are unsure of their vocational interests. Increasing flexibility for students to change to a parallel discipline, such as landscape architecture, interior architecture, computing in architecture, planning or construction, and vice versa, is important. Developing a special postgraduate experience for the Master of Architecture degree may also be a consideration, with the graduation design studio set up to reflect a level of complexity and depth that bridges to ‘best practice’ as the objective.

Developing discipline skills within an interdisciplinary framework (with the various nuances including cross-/meta-/trans-disciplinary) is another educational theme of interest. The education of the architect, as has probably always been the case, requires exposure to a range of other related disciplines to ensure enough practical knowledge is available to work effectively in a team.

Perhaps in summary, the key educational objectives worth aspiring to are: strong discipline skills; a deep understanding of architecture in an interdisciplinary context; a closer relationship between practice and universities, including a change of culture to encourage greater links between leading practice, research, learning and teaching; and, most importantly perhaps, developing values that reflect independent, critical and rigorous thinking/design-thinking skills. ■■

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¹ *Understanding Architectural Education in Australasia. Vol 1 & 2 (2008) Oswald and Williams, ISBN:978-0-9805545-1-9; Curriculum Development in Studio Teaching (2009) Zehner, Forsyth et al, Report from UNSW/University of Queensland/RMIT University/University of Tasmania.*